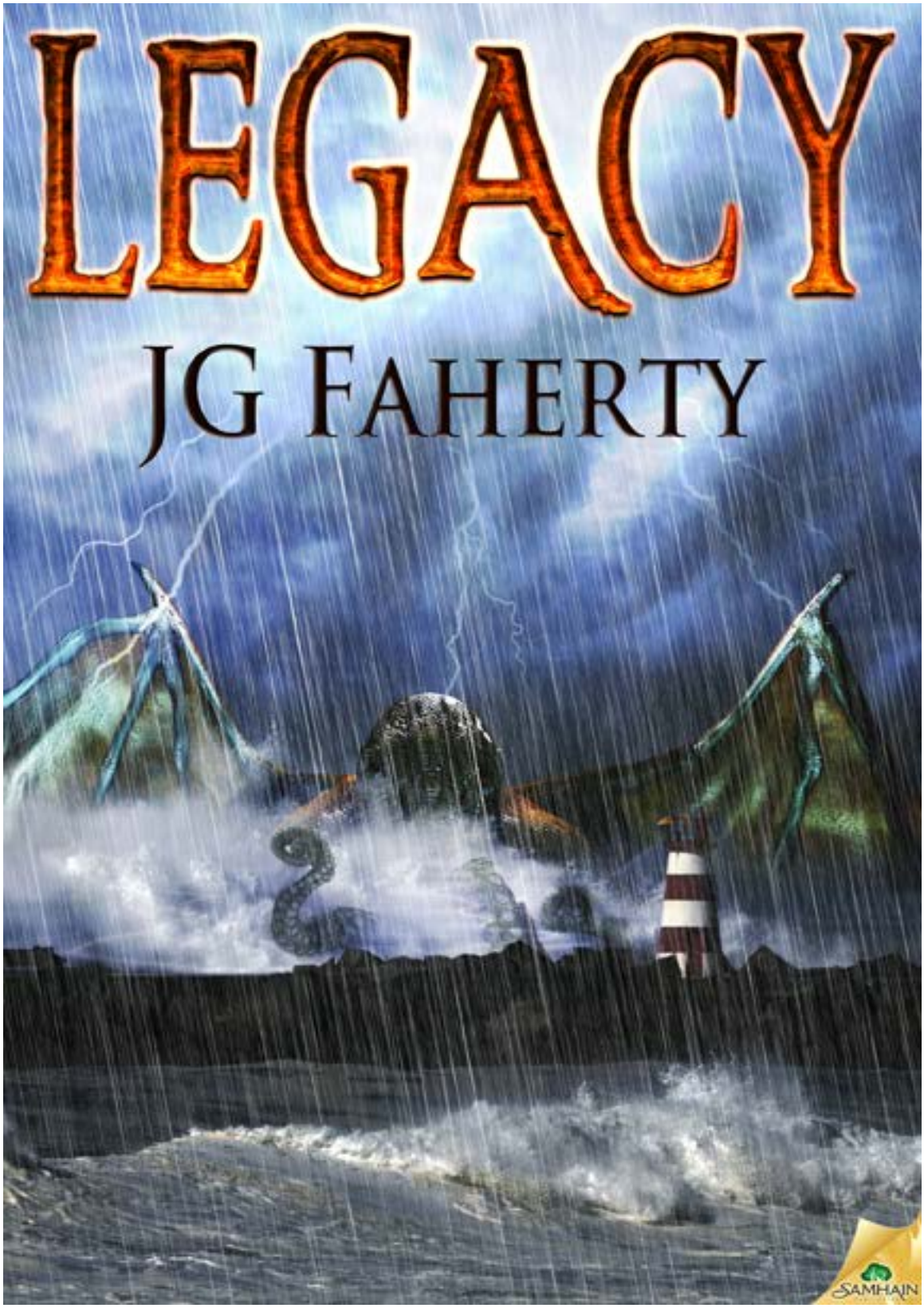

LEGACY
JG FAHERTY
SAMHAIN

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Some gods demand blood!

Sean Black, a teenage science whiz in a small New England town, leads a pretty normal life...until the night of the storm. After that, nothing is the same. He experiences strange nightmares. He hallucinates about alien creatures and begins to notice weird physical changes in his body, things no one else seems to see. The girl he's had a crush on for years is acting strange as well, delivering cryptic messages to him that things are not what they seem. When he discovers a secret room in the library, Sean finds himself faced with a life-changing decision, one that could either save the world or plunge it into centuries of death and destruction—with Sean ruling over all.

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Legacy

JG Faherty

Dedication

To my wife, Andrea, my parents, and my friends: thank you for continuing to be my biggest fans and promoters.

To Don D'Auria and the fantastic staff at Samhain: thank you for making this book a reality!

To everyone who's reading this: thank you for supporting writers. Without you, we couldn't keep doing what we do.

I also dedicate this book to the memory of lost pets, loved ones, friends, and colleagues: they are the true legacies, because they remain with us forever.

Chapter One

It began with the storm, and the nightmare. Afterwards, nothing was ever the same.

I've never been the same.

The nightmare came first, at least for me.

I walked across a bleak landscape. The black dome of the sky extended forever in all directions, unmarred by stars or planets, yet somehow there was light enough for me to see by. Gray, featureless land stretched out to all sides. No hills or mountains interrupted the desolate plain; in fact, the only evidence of geologic activity was the presence of large stones, boulders really, that lay half-buried in the grassless, monochrome soil.

Not that life didn't exist in that dreary place. A double handful of trees, each one spaced hundreds of feet from its nearest kin, dotted the monotonous topography. Their distance from each other suggested a repulsion for their own kind, either environmental or emotional. Drawing close to one, I understood their aversion to proximity; in fact, I felt it myself. Festering wounds gaped in the drab bark, weeping fluids colored mold-green and pus-yellow. An atrocious odor like nothing I'd ever smelled before emanated from the oozing sores.

I backed away from the abominable stench just in time to avoid capture by grasping tentacles masquerading as branches. The entire alien growth leaned toward me, appendages extended and waving in my direction. I took myself farther away, fearful the creature might uproot itself and follow.

After my encounter with the botanical nightmare, I chose my path, such as it was, with more care.

I'd gone perhaps another hundred yards, certainly no more than that, when a violent bolt of red lightning ruptured the ebon sky.

I froze as the afterimage left blinding jagged lines of color across my vision. The empty plain offered no protection, and I grew nervous about being exposed. I had no desire to serve as a human lightning rod. More angry flashes fractured the all-encompassing blackness. I held my breath, anticipating the tumultuous thunder I felt sure would come with such a spectacle.

Instead, a sepulchral voice spoke to me.

"Open your mind to me, open yourself to me. I am the gateway; through me they speak. I am your legacy, your history and your future. You and I will be as one. The past and present shall reunite. I will fill you, and you shall rise above those of lesser status.

"Together we shall speak the unspoken and call those whose names are not known.

"The spirits of the great places beyond space prepare themselves for battle once again, waiting only for you to guide them forth. Before you stands the Gate to the othersphere. Only speak the words and those of the realms will enter three wide and seven strong.

"Those who hold the stars in their power and live in the spaces in between shall awaken!

"*Azathoth! Tulzscha! Cthulhu! Yog-Sothoth! Shub-Niggurath!*

"Nine hundred ninety-nine times I shall call their names! Listen to my words. For I am—"

Chapter Two

"—Nyarlathotep!"

I burst from the covers, nearly falling from my bed in the process.

For a moment I just sat there, chest heaving, heart jackhammering, my back as straight and stiff as an iron rod. My hands clenched the sheets so hard my fingers ached. The echo of the strange word I'd shouted still reverberated in my brain, each repetition evoking dread.

Gradually, I eased from my rigid state as I grew fully aware that I was back in the familiar surroundings of my room, rather than the dreadful landscape of my dreams. Just as I was about to lie back on my pillow, thunder crashed outside my window, the unexpected aural explosion causing me to release a tiny squirt of piss into my underwear. It took me a moment to realize it was only an ordinary thunderstorm, that the dire crimson bolts and virulent landscapes I'd so recently wandered through hadn't followed me back to the real world.

Lightning, wonderfully ordinary and white, flashed across the sky. Before the first jagged bolt faded away, three more bursts followed in rapid succession, accompanied by cannon shots of thunder that shook the walls of the house. The lightning erased the night's darkness like celestial flash pots, as if God himself were taking the stage for the universe's greatest rock concert.

Two more hellish claps of thunder accompanied more lightning, and I revised my initial evaluation of the storm's normalcy.

My bedroom door banged open, delivering my third fright in as many minutes.

"Holy crap!" my brother shouted, his eyes wide and his face corpse-white in the glare of more strobing lightning. I feared that if it grew any brighter outside, I'd actually be able to see right through him. "Sean, you gotta come see this. It's like the end of the world out there!"

Normally I'd have cursed Owen for barging into my room without knocking, but the truth was, I felt a large measure of relief at seeing another human, even if it was my obnoxious little brother. So, rather than yell at him like I normally would have, I told him I'd be down in a minute. A manic grin on his face, he turned and ran from the room to the accompaniment of further extraterrestrial drumming.

I pulled on fresh underwear, sweatpants and a T-shirt, and went downstairs to join

Owen, my mom and my dad on the front porch, where they stood watching the incredible pyrotechnics.

Our house was a large New England–style Victorian with a wide wraparound porch. The porch had always been our favorite gathering place as a family, more popular even than the kitchen. In the summer, we'd sit in oversized rocking chairs and drink the lemonade or iced tea my mother made, listening to the gently comforting sounds of growling lawn mowers, chirping insects and calling night birds. In the fall, before the frigid New England winter made it too uncomfortable to be outside, we'd cradle mugs of hot chocolate in our chilly hands as the winds brought us the smells of burning leaves and homemade soup on its weightless waves.

One of our favorite things to do was sit under the protection of the overhanging roof and watch the summer storms roll across the island. You could sway back and forth on the old-fashioned swinging couch my dad had rescued from a yard sale, sipping cold, tart lemonade—or in my parents' case, beer—and ooh and ahh at the lightning over the ocean only two blocks away. In spite of the awesome violence of the storms, watching them from the safety of the porch was a peaceful, reflective pastime, almost meditative in nature. The wind would bring a welcome coolness to the hot, muggy air that always preceded a summer thunderstorm, and the hiss of falling rain would act like white noise, creating a hushed silence, as if the rest of the world no longer existed.

I'd always enjoyed those evenings most of all.

This storm engendered no such feelings.

Rather than sitting, we gathered just outside the front door, as if responding to a primitive need for protection, a genetic instinct to huddle in a group for survival. No breeze jostled my hair or cooled the sweat on my brow; instead, the air grew heavier with each passing moment, a physical weight that made itself known every time I tried to draw a breath.

I was already a jangle of nerves from my dream, and seeing my parents standing there without cans of beer in their hands made the whole scene even scarier. Not that either of them was an alcoholic; as far back as I could remember, I'd never seen them get drunk, not even at barbeques or clambakes. But more often than not they'd grab a Narragansett or Harpoon ale from the fridge the same way a kid will reach for a soda. Especially on the hot days of midsummer. One before dinner, maybe a couple while watching the game, mowing the lawn or jawing with the neighbors. Not every day, but frequently enough for me to consider it commonplace around the house or when company came to visit.

On the porch, it was tradition.

The last time I'd seen them sans beer at home was when we'd been sitting in front of the television watching the events of September 11 unfold. The schools had closed early that day and my mother had to pick me up from kindergarten. Not long after we walked in the door, my father pulled into the driveway. Mom had cried while she watched television; Dad had poured himself a glass of the twenty-year-old single-malt scotch he only brought out for weddings and funerals. It was years before I really understood what had happened that day, but even as a small child their reactions had made a lasting impression on me.

This was the first time a storm had ever engendered the same type of anxiety in our household. Not even hurricanes or nor'easters, which we'd dealt with more than once, had produced such a profound disquiet.

"Norm, I've never seen lightning like this." Another flash accompanied Mom's words, the crazed bolt arcing wildly across the sky before arrowing down to the not-so-distant waters of the Atlantic.

Dad's reply was partially lost in the rolling boom of thunder that followed.

"—don't know where it came from. The Weather Channel said the storm was supposed stay out over the water and skirt past us, not stop and settle in like a poor relative."

"Thunderstorms are one thing," Mom replied, twisting a lock of sandy-brown hair between two fingers. "But there's no wind and no rain. This reminds me of the weather we'd get back home right before a tornado."

Mom didn't come right out and say she was scared, but I could see from her face that the storm was really affecting her. Unlike my dad and his side of the family, Mom wasn't a native New Englander. She'd grown up in Oklahoma, where spending the day at Summit Lake constituted going to the beach. Her family had moved to Massachusetts when she was eleven, after they'd lost the roof of their house to a twister for the second year in a row.

"Don't worry, hon." Dad put a beefy arm around her and pulled her against his chest. "We're on an island. It's not like this is a hurricane. The closest thing to a tornado we ever get around here is waterspouts. And they're only dangerous if you're out in a boat. This is nothing but a freak summer storm that'll blow over before you know it."

Mom didn't look convinced. She leaned against him, her lips tight and one hand still tugging at her hair as she watched the lightning bolts chase each other across the sky.

"Daddy, what's wrong with the clouds?" Owen was leaning over the railing, his face turned upward.

My parents joined him. I didn't want to; I was afraid I'd find myself staring at the alien

skyscape of my dream. What I really wanted to do was run back upstairs and hide under the covers with a flashlight, the way my nine-year-old brother sometimes did after a scary movie.

Somehow my feet ended up carrying me forward instead.

"It's just a different type of storm cloud," Dad told him. But he was lying; I could hear it in his voice. More importantly, I could see the evidence with my own eyes.

Nights in the modern world are no longer dark times when you can't see to get around. Lights from cities, and towns, and highways cast a glow we're usually not even aware of, a glow that allows us to find our way around outside when we're taking out the garbage or putting something in the car. If the sky happens to be cloudy, a lot of that light reflects back down to us, making the night world even more visible.

That's why I had no trouble seeing the bilious green and ochre streaks in the purple-black masses hovering over Tall Pine Island. They looked like ordinary storm clouds infected with some type of horrible disease, their gaseous flesh gone gangrenous. The sickly lines of putrid color were like tracks of poison running through healthy tissue. Rather than forming random patterns, the ghastly hues radiated outward from a central point, a spiral design of meteorological cancer. As I watched, more lightning flared from the core of the spiral. It felt like I was inside one of those glass balls you see at museums, the ones where if you place a finger on the surface, tiny bolts of electricity dart back and forth.

I lowered my gaze slightly, hoping to squelch the sudden gurgle of nausea rumbling in my guts, and caught sight of the clock tower sticking up over the other buildings in the center of town. A sickening realization came over me.

The atmospheric tumor sat directly over the town of New Hope.

My town.

Although nothing about the situation resembled the events of my dream, I couldn't shake the feeling that the two were related in some way. Bits and pieces of that nightmare, nonsensical names and chants, attempted to come forward. I didn't want to remember, but the mysterious words beat a determined path toward me. I placed a hand over my mouth, afraid some of those evil words might burst free before I could stop them. I didn't know why, but I felt it would be very bad to speak any of those words out loud.

So I was relieved when a tiny yellow light, barely a spark compared to the unnatural fireworks overhead, pulled my attention from the repulsive vista and the mental images it conjured.

"Someone's coming," I said, pointing to the sidewalk, where the bobbing glow of the

flashlight was growing stronger.

"Who is it?" Mom's voice trembled, as if she were afraid the storm had brought alien visitors to our shores. At that moment, the idea didn't seem so far-fetched.

"Chuck and Stacy," Dad replied when the next set of pyrotechnics lit the landscape, revealing the newcomers' faces.

"Hey, Norm, Dusty," Chuck Meriweather called out, raising a hand in greeting. My parents waved in return. I paid no attention to them. Instead, I focused on a third figure, behind Mr. Meriweather's wife. My heart beat faster when I saw her lithe body and California-blonde hair illuminated by the storm.

Melissa Meriweather.

The girl of my dreams.

Chapter Three

At sixteen, Melissa Meriweather was six months older than me. She was also the most popular girl in school, among both students and teachers. A star on the track team, she carried a straight-A average and volunteered at Rose Memorial Hospital two evenings a week.

Her well-proportioned body, toned rather than muscular, drew the eye of every straight male between the ages of thirteen and eighteen; when she hit the beach in her string bikini, you could up that number to include most of the adult men in town as well. And some of the women.

The only thing that kept people from staring lecherously at her chest when they talked to her was the fact that she had a face as perfect as her body. A tiny nose, the slightest scattering of freckles on her cheeks, and eyes as green as the shallow waters off the coast of our one-town island. Her smile, filled with white, perfectly straight teeth, could brighten even the most depressing day.

All the kids in our class were enamored of her, "crushed on her" as the current slang went.

I was no different. Hell, I'd been in love with Melissa since the day I'd met her eight years ago. Her family had moved to the neighborhood not long after we did. For most of those years, she'd been my only friend; until recently, she'd been my best friend. Even now, with her being Miss Popular while I slunk in the shadows with the science geeks and library trolls, we always managed to find time to spend with each other. Partly because we shared a common bond of friendship from when we were younger.

And partly because I knew her darkest secret.

"Hey, Sean," she greeted me as she came up the steps, her smile as dazzling as the lightning overhead.

Once she stood in front of me, the sky could have split open and disgorged flying butt-monkeys and I wouldn't have noticed.

"Hi, Melissa." She hated to be called anything but her full name. "What's up?"

Unlike a lot of my classmates, I was never tongue-tied around her. Probably because I'd been crazy about her long before she'd turned into the shining star of New Hope, brighter than Tall Pine Island's lone lighthouse. At ten, she'd been a scrawny kid with too many

freckles. By the time she reached thirteen, not much had changed; she'd been an ordinary-looking, flat-chested, skinny tomboy, still three long years away from being voted "Most Attractive" at our high school.

I hadn't cared that she wasn't cute and flirty and filling out her training bra like some of the other girls in our school, and she hadn't cared that I was the dorky smart kid with the thick glasses who'd been bumped up a grade.

We'd done everything together—fishing, dropping crab pots from the pier, bicycling around the island. We'd even dared each other to skinny-dip a couple of times. Seeing her naked body had filled me with urges that I'd never had before. The first time I ever masturbated, it was Melissa's face I saw in my imagination. Three years later, I still relived those afternoons in my dreams and fantasies, only instead of us being two scrawny, underdeveloped kids, Melissa's early-teen breasts morphed into round, firm globes like fresh summer apples, and my penis wasn't shrunken into a bitty mushroom from the cold waters of Miller's Stream.

"Some freaky storm, huh? The thunder woke me up. Scared the crap outta me." She gave me an embarrassed smile.

"Uh, yeah, me too." I thought about telling her how my sleep had been ruined by my crazy dream, but something held my tongue, something more than just the gradual drifting apart we'd been experiencing ever since she'd begun dating Jim Thome, a senior on the football team.

I'll admit to feeling more than a little jealousy when Melissa and Jim had taken up, but truth be told, she'd been changing even before that. First her body had developed, somewhere after her fifteenth birthday. At the same time, her freckles had faded away, leaving behind an acne-free complexion that always seemed to be tan.

As her looks and body blossomed, she'd become more interested in clothes and being popular than in catching frogs or reading comic books. Of course, I'd changed as well, delving more and more into the mysteries of biology and mathematics and spending less time riding my bike or tossing a Frisbee. Melissa continued to keep up her grades, but we no longer shared as many advanced classes in school. And after-school study sessions had gone from every day to only those times when she needed help for an upcoming test.

As children, we'd both had dreams of becoming famous explorers, trekking the globe in search of unknown civilizations. Now, I wanted to follow the footsteps of eminent scientists like E. O. Wilson and Stephen Jay Gould, while Melissa seemed more interested in being arm candy than pursuing a life of substance.

Nevertheless, she remained the only popular person in school who'd deign to talk to me. And I still embraced a secret fantasy that one day she'd see the light, realize it was better to be with an intellectual equal rather than a physical one.

I knew I suffered from a heavy case of teen angst, the unpopular kid forced to watch his onetime friend and unrequited love move on to a different social circle. I was the living embodiment of every teenage movie ever made—the ones where the dorky kid has to sit back while the girl he loves goes out with the star athlete, where the girl has to stick up for him when her popular friends make fun of him. Yet in spite of everything, I harbored hope. After all, we'd been each other's first kiss, sitting on my porch one summer night.

Bonds like that don't break easily.

Besides, in the movies the girl always comes around in the end. A slim prospect to pin my chances to, but it was all I had.

Yet, despite our shared history, despite the fact that I'd trust Melissa with my life, I found I couldn't trust her with my nightmare. As I stood with her under the fearsome eye of that unnatural storm, something kept me silent on the subject of my dream, almost as if I had harbored a secret of great value, a secret that had to remain hidden or it would be taken from me.

"Sean? Is everything okay? You look weird."

I realized I'd gotten too wrapped up in my thoughts. "Yeah. I'm just tired. I was up late studying for my SATs."

It wasn't a total lie; I had been studying earlier in the night. I just hadn't been up late.

"Still planning on starting college early?" She took my hand and drew me away from the adults. Owen started to follow us, a devilish grin on his face. I waved him away with a frantic hand. He flipped his middle finger at me but left us alone. Sometimes he did show a little common sense.

Melissa led me to the far end of the porch, out of the circle of light cast by the bulb over the door. Even after we stopped, she kept her hand lightly on my arm, unaware of how the soft, simple touch of her fingers affected me.

"Yep. I want to get out of high school as fast as possible, get started on college. That's where the real fun is." I tried to make it sound like a joke; however, she wasn't buying it.

"Teenagers can be real assholes, Sean." She had to raise her voice over the continuing thunder. "We both know that. But don't kid yourself that college will be so different, especially as an under-age freshman."

I wanted to shout at her, "What do you know?" but I kept my cool. I had no desire to

alienate the one person still willing to spend time with me outside of a library. Besides, it wasn't so long ago she'd been teased in school for being smart and dorky. Maybe she really did still remember the way it felt.

"I know. But at least in college there'll be other people with the same interests as me, students and teachers. And I'll be able to escape to the science labs when I want to."

She shook her head, her soft, straight hair waving back and forth, pale white in the ongoing fireworks display illuminating the town.

"All work and no play. That's not the way to do it." Somehow she managed to make her statement sound more like an order than friendly advice.

"Fine. Find someone to play with me, then." The bitter words escaped me before I could stop them.

"What?" Her eyes opened wide.

I pulled away from her hand and leaned against the railing, which vibrated under my palms with each new thunderclap. "Sorry. Just feeling sorry for myself."

She nodded. I had to give her credit. She didn't try to tell me I had no reason to be depressed. We both knew that aside from her, I got along better with my teachers than my peers. And sometimes even they didn't understand me.

"Before we came over here, my dad heard on the radio that this storm has everyone confused." Melissa had a knack for knowing when to change topics. She also knew my biggest weakness: curiosity.

"Why?" Despite my blue mood, I couldn't help asking.

"The way it's just sitting over us, not moving. And all this lightning with no rain. The storm's been dumping rain the whole time it moved up the coast, but now, nothing? It's almost…unnatural."

Images of vacant plains under siege from red lightning attacks flashed through my head. I wanted to say I'd had my fill of unnatural for the night. Instead, I bit my lip and stayed quiet.

Melissa either didn't notice my silence or chose to ignore it. Most likely the latter.

"And what's with the sky? It's like God puked up those clouds after a night of bad Mexican food."

She chuckled at her own joke while an otherworldly voice whispered alien words in my head.

Avalla nophilm gjosar r'jim! Shub-Niggurath! R'lyeh!

Namarasi Annunaki io mlgo ramog!

Enki anu Nyarlathotep!

Melissa's body jerked as if she'd touched a live wire. "What?"

"Huh?" I felt caught between worlds; an image of that other place lay superimposed over her, over the whole porch, and I had trouble focusing on her.

"You said something weird just now." She gave a funny look. "What's up with you tonight?"

Had I really spoken those words aloud? I rubbed my eyes and felt a measure of relief when I opened them again and everything had returned to normal. "Nothing. Like I said, just tired."

"Tired? More like stoned. Have you—"

The pop-hiss of beer cans opening interrupted her. We glanced at our parents. Dad had finally recovered his usual good cheer and retrieved four Narragansetts from the fridge.

"Looks like everything's returning to normal," I said, grasping at the chance to change the subject.

"Yeah. That means they'll be out here for a while." Melissa's mouth pulled to one side. "Which is my cue to go home. I, for one, need my beauty sleep."

"I think you can afford to miss a few hours." I raised one eyebrow in an exaggerated leer.

She laughed and punched my shoulder. "Save the lines for when you've got a hot chick you're trying to impress."

I looked away. "Maybe that's what I'm doing." I cringed even as I said it. It really was my night for blurting things out.

"You don't need to impress me, Sean."

I turned around, but she was already walking across the porch. With her back to me, I couldn't see her expression, so I had no idea how to take her words.

"Going home, Melissa?" I heard Mr. Meriweather ask.

"Yeah, time for bed," she said to her father. "'Night, Mom, 'night Dad. Goodnight, Mr. and Mrs. Black."

"Goodnight, Melissa."

"We'll see you at home, dear."

I watched her go down the steps and into the night. Lightning flashes alternately illuminated and hid her, turning her into a ghostly presence gliding away from me. For one brief moment, I thought she turned and raised a hand, but then it was dark again. When the next burst lit up the sky, she was gone.

"What's the matter, Sean? No smoochy-smoochy tonight?" Owen made wet kissing

noises at me.

I raised my hand, intending to scare the bratty smirk off his face. "I'll grind the flesh from your bones, insolent one! *Phallosium! Achi nir vermis!*"

Owen's face went slack and his eyes wide. He backed up three steps, then turned and ran into the house.

I stood there, my hand in the air, wondering if I was still dreaming. I should have been frightened for my sanity.

Instead, something inside me laughed, and I felt a dark pleasure at the reaction my words had produced.

Chapter Four

I remained on the porch until the storm ended, long after Melissa's parents went home and my parents went to bed.

The storm's finale had been as spectacular and weird as the storm itself. There'd been no fading away, no dissipation of the clouds. Instead, I stood lone witness to an implosion of gaseous matter, the roiling, fungal masses compressing into a smaller and smaller ball, the center of which was a depthless black sphere, as if a wormhole had opened up over the island. Lightning flashed in increasingly rapid bursts while the atmospheric blight swirled around faster and faster, turning the sky into a cosmic toilet.

Then, with a final crescendo of light and sound that shook the entire house and lit the heavens like an atomic bomb, the storm vanished, leaving behind only a normal-looking night sky, complete with twinkling stars and half-moon. Other than a few car alarms squawking in the distance, the night was silent, the echo of the thunderous climax gradually fading from my ears.

Once the atmospheric oddity disappeared, a tremendous weariness overtook me. It took all my fading strength to stagger up the stairs to my room, clutching the banister with both hands the entire way.

I fell into bed at three fifteen, not bothering to remove my clothes.

My sleep was instant and dreamless.

Chapter Five

I awoke to bright June sunshine. A quick glance at my alarm clock showed I'd slept for almost nine hours, something of a miracle for me. I was a habitual early riser, unlike many of my so-called peers. I've always felt time spent lounging in bed was time wasted. And since I rarely stayed up late, I had no problem getting enough sleep and still being up before eight on the weekends.

I rolled out from under the covers and uttered a gasp that would have turned into a scream if I'd had the breath for it.

Staring at me from my second-floor window was a writhing mass of scabrous, sewage-green tentacles. A gaping maw, lined with row upon row of thin, needlelike teeth, occupied the center of this degenerate monstrosity. Each gray denticle dripped a thick, syrupy, amber-colored liquid, which I instinctively knew to be poisonous.

I blinked and the alien visage was gone.

Without thinking, I crossed the room and threw open the window, torn between a dreadful desire to see the creature again—and prove I hadn't been hallucinating—and a desperate fear that it hadn't been there at all.

I needed to assure myself it had been real, for to have imagined such a thing as the creature I'd seen surely meant I was suffering some sort of breakdown.

Leaning out the window as far as I dared, until almost half my body stuck out into space, I turned this way and that, looking for the beast. Nothing in my field of vision seemed out of the ordinary. Mrs. Johnson next door was weeding her flowerbed, her heavyset body clad in its usual housecoat. To my right, the Bronson twins were drawing on the sidewalk in colored chalk and squealing with innocent laughter. Far to my left, the choppy waters of the Atlantic cast thousands of sparkling reflections in all directions.

No one screamed in terror or ran for their lives.

"There you are, sleepyhead."

My mother's voice gave me such a start that I had to clutch at the windowsill to avoid tumbling to the lawn below.

"Late night," I replied, withdrawing to the safety of the room, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"For all of us." She glanced around at the piles of clothing, books and adolescent detritus

that hid most of the floor around my bed. "Go fix yourself something to eat and then clean up this pigsty you call a room."

I'd been fixing my own breakfast for several years by then, something my mother had insisted on since it allowed her to "do other things in the morning". Normally, I was fine with it. Cereal, toast, eggs—all the basics—were well within my limited culinary skill set. If I happened to be in a good mood, I might even fix something for my brother, too. However, I had the sudden desire to let someone else take care of my gustatory needs, an unusual yearning to have someone wait on me.

"Could you fix me something? I'll have bacon and eggs. And toast. With orange juice."

"Bacon and eggs? I don't have time…"

Her words trailed off as she stared at me. At the same moment, I felt a tickle inside my nose and caught a glimpse of movement in the lower periphery of my vision, a blurred object that appeared and disappeared again.

For one brief second, my mother's eyes grew wide. Then the look of alarm left her face, so quickly I couldn't be sure if I'd actually seen it.

"Sure, Sean. I'll fix that right away. You go wash up." She turned and left, leaving me with a host of unanswered questions and a strong desire to see myself in a mirror.

I hurried to the bathroom. The face that stared back looked…normal.

It was me.

Sandy hair, the same color as all the men in my family. Light brown eyes, decent looking enough when not distorted behind the thick glasses I had to resort to when my contacts bothered me. Ordinary nose and mouth. Same old ears, which I'd always thought were a little too large for my head, so I kept my hair long enough to hide that particular flaw.

I reached a hand up to smooth down my sleep-disheveled hair and froze.

A faint spiderweb of blue veins covered my palm. In the mirror, the back of my hand appeared to have a dead-flesh gray hue. I turned the offending appendage back and forth, blinking several times to see if this vision would follow the tentacled monster back into oblivion.

Nothing had changed.

I touched a finger from my other hand to the corpse-like skin. Nausea rolled in my stomach when I saw that both hands were affected by the same condition. The abnormal coloring extended from my fingertips to just above the wrist. I pushed, prodded, and scratched at different areas. Everything felt the same. I held both hands in front of me, turning them over. The nails were an even darker shade of bluish-gray, as if starved of oxygen. I spread my fingers and discovered that a flap of extra flesh, so thin I could see through it, now filled about a quarter inch at the base of every gap between the digits. Tiny

blue and green capillaries pulsed in the membranes.

It was all too much for me.

"Mom!"

I pounded down the stairs, not waiting for her to come to my rescue. She was in the kitchen, melting butter in a frying pan.

"Mom!" My voice had risen to a whiny, preteen octave, but I didn't care.

"What's the matter?" She put the pan down.

"Look!" I held my frighteningly deformed hands out to her.

"Look at what?" She stared first at them, then at me, a blank expression on her face.

"Don't you see?" I shook them at her. I could hear the hysterical tone in my voice, but I couldn't control it.

"I see dirty hands. I thought I told you to wash up."

Her calm tones and complete obliviousness to my physical abnormality made me pause. My mother was a lot of things, but underprotective wasn't one of them. All Owen or I had to do was sneeze near her and she'd be passing out vitamin C tablets and telling us to dress warmer.

There was no way she wouldn't notice something as drastic as my hands suddenly turning into something more at home on a salamander or frog. And if she had noticed it, she'd have already packed me into the car for a trip to the emergency room.

Was it just my imagination acting up again, like the flying squid-thing? Was I seeing things that weren't there?

"Never mind." I went to the kitchen sink and washed my hands. They stayed fish-belly gray. I forced myself ignore them, even though I could feel the webbing bending and stretching as I rubbed the soap across them.

I sat down at the table. My appetite was gone, but I poked at my eggs and toast until my mother left to go run errands. I did my best not to look down at my amphibious appendages, fearful I might vomit right there in the kitchen.

After she left, I held my hands up again. They hadn't changed back to normal, at least not that I could see. Assuming, of course, that they'd actually transformed at all.

"Maybe I'm really just imagining it," I whispered to the empty kitchen.

There was one way to find out. I decided to go outside. If I'd really mutated into something abnormal, surely someone would notice. All I had to do was make sure people saw me; if they screamed and ran away, I was becoming a monster. If they ignored me, I was crazy.

Some set of choices. Hideous beast or lunatic. I wasn't sure what I should be hoping for.

Chapter Six

After changing into a fresh T-shirt and shorts, I left the house and walked toward the center of New Hope, my body on automatic pilot while my brain pondered my dilemma.

Whenever I feel depressed or I have something on my mind, a walk down Main Street, then over to the waterfront, usually clears my head. The clean, fresh smell of the salty air rolling in from the ocean, the familiar sound of seagulls squawking for food down by the docks, the storefronts that hadn't changed a bit since I was a young boy—it all combined to make me feel at home. Every crack in the sidewalk, every cobblestone by the pier, every face on the streets, they were all as familiar to me as the furniture in my own living room. Small towns are like that; everything is so ingrained in the memory that if something changes, like a store going out of business or the police chief getting a new truck, it's like looking in the mirror one morning and finding a huge blemish on your nose.

For the longest time, Melissa had been my walking partner, but lately I'd been traversing the streets and alleys of New Hope more often than not by myself. Sometimes I felt lonely, remembering how it had been to talk with her as we strolled through town, but in a way her absence had also been good for me, helping me get used to her not being around anymore.

The early afternoon sun was warm on my back when I got to Main Street. My first stop was Nellie's Sweet Shoppe, where I bought a pack of gum and a chocolate bar. I made sure to count out the money slowly and display my malignant-looking hands to old Mrs. Cameron.

"How are you today, Mr. Black?" Mrs. Cameron's greeting was the same as always. She placed my candy in a small paper bag and put my change in my repulsive palm without batting an eye.

If anything, my hands looked worse then than they had in my kitchen. The veins were more prominent and my flesh was sprouting irregular patches of flaking, peeling skin. The sickly color had spread well past my wrists.

"All right, I guess." What could I say? *Look at me; can't you see I'm a monster?* Seeing things was bad enough. Publicly raving about my hallucinations would only earn me a one-way ride to the mainland.

I left the store as quickly as possible. As I wandered down Main Street, I repeated my experiment at the drugstore, purchasing a newspaper whose headline shouted "New Hope Center of Unexplained Electrical Storm". After that, I visited several other businesses and

made sure to shake hands with, or wave to, several shop owners and customers. Not once did anyone recoil from my gruesome digits.

By the time I reached the town's only diner, I'd resigned myself to having a long talk with my parents that night and asking them to make an appointment with the doctor for me. Maybe it was just the stress of studying for my SATs. Hell, for all I knew, there could have been a streak of madness in the family tree no one had ever told me about. I could hear my parents already: "Oh, the same thing happened to crazy old Uncle Chet. He used to think his closet was a doorway to another universe."

The fragrant odors of bacon, hamburgers, meatloaf and fried clams twined together in the air outside the Waterfront Diner and set off an explosion of saliva in my mouth. I realized I hadn't eaten anything since dinner the previous night—the candy I'd bought still sat in my pocket, and my breakfast was in the garbage at home.

I dug into my pocket and counted my money. Thirteen dollars and some change. More than enough for a burger, fries and a large Coke. By then it was almost two o'clock, and all the walking I'd done had me thirsty. I sat down at the counter and grabbed a menu from the holder, wondering if I'd have enough cash to add an ice cream sundae to my order.

"Morning, Sean. How goes it?" I looked up from the menu in surprise. Marty Sloan, dressed in his usual food-stained white pants, T-shirt and apron, put a Coke down in front of me.

"Uh, hi, Mr. Sloan," I managed to stammer out. He'd never spoken to me before, not even when I came in with my parents. In fact, he rarely spoke to anyone under the age of twenty unless he absolutely had to. It was a well-known fact around town that the owner of the Waterfront Diner enjoyed the presence of kids and teenagers about as much as he did food critics. Or deodorant.

"What can I get ya today?" A broad smile showcased several missing teeth but looked genuine nonetheless. His body odor, a heady mix of sweat, grease and overripe cheese, threatened to pummel the tantalizing smells of the food into submission.

"I'll have a hamburger and fries. Please." In my confusion, I forgot all about my sundae.

"Comin' right up." He leaned forward, causing me to hold my breath, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "This one's on the house. But don't let anyone know. Can't have people thinkin' I'm givin' food away." Then he was heading back to the kitchen, moments before I thought I'd start coughing.

Just when you think things can't get any stranger, I thought.

I put the menu away, catching another glimpse of my repulsive hands. Their color had

grown even more hideous, if that was possible, like I'd just crawled out of a grave.

Several people passed by the counter as they headed in or out. All of them made it a point to say hello to me, even people I barely recognized.

I was beginning to feel like the butt of an immense practical joke. Half the people smiling and waving at me wouldn't have known me from a cement block a day ago. But what kind of joke is it where everyone is extra nice to you? And who would do something like that, and why?

Before I could digest this latest addition to a day full of oddities, Sloan placed a giant double burger and a basket of steaming steak fries in front of me. My stomach growled in anticipation, sending actual tremors of hunger through my midsection.

Maybe I just needed to eat something.

I thanked him again and doused the greasy patties in ketchup and mustard, layered on some lettuce, tomato and onion, and prepared to take a giant bite.

I had the sandwich halfway to my mouth, which was open and waiting, when all hell broke loose.

The tentacles burst from my oral cavity, five or six of them, each one as thick as my index finger and tapering to rounded ends no wider than the head of a cotton swab. They started out as a pale, pale pink where they emerged from my lips and darkened to bloodred at their quivering tips. A series of ridges, visible as the appendages squirmed and writhed, ran down the undersides, like the scales of a snake's belly.

The prehensile extensions wrapped themselves around my food, pulled it from my frozen hands, and withdrew into my mouth. My throat expanded in reptilian fashion to swallow the burger whole, while the boneless appendages returned to whatever place inside me they'd been lurking.

It happened so fast I didn't even have time to choke.

I looked around, anticipating startled gasps and exclamations of fear from nearby diners.

No one was paying the slightest attention to me.

Mr. and Mrs. Coleman, two stools to my left, were calmly spooning up mouthfuls of Marty's famous clam chowder. Just past them, a man in a business suit was placing his order with Maggie, the skinny blonde lady who'd worked the counter for as long as I could remember.

To my right, three men in stained coveralls and rubber work boots discussed the previous night's Red Sox game while they hungrily devoured the meatloaf special.

"Boy, you sure was hungry, Sean."

Marty Sloan stood before me again, wiping his hands on his apron and adding another layer of grease to the weeks-old strata already layered there.

A lone tentacle wormed its way out of my still-open mouth, descended into the French fries, snared two in python-like fashion, dipped them into a glob of ketchup and retreated again. My throat gave a reflexive swallow.

Sloan never batted an eye.

"Let me know if you want a refill on your Coke." He walked away, shouting for Maggie to put another pot of coffee on.

My mind screamed in terror but my mouth stayed silent. I wanted to curl up and hide, just pass out and wait in blessed oblivion, but I felt none of the dizziness that comes with a fainting spell. No black spots crossed my vision.

Even my stomach felt calm.

"This can't be happening," I whispered.

I slid off my stool and ran for the door, suddenly desperate to be away from everyone, to escape the confines of the diner with its walls and noise and crowds.

I raced down Main Street, heading for the wharf. I wanted to smell the salt air, splash cold water on my face.

Wake up from the crazy nightmare my life had become.

I reached the first of the benches that formed a line down Water Street, grasped the top of it with dead-gray hands. As I stared out at the ocean, my dream from the night before came back to me.

The dream, I realized. That was the turning point, the nexus of my crisis. Before then, my life had been normal. Since then, I'd been living in some kind of dreadful fantasy.

That place, those words.

Yog-Sothoth.

Shub-Niggurath,

Azathoth.

The world swam around me. Colored shapes filled my field of view, rainbow paramecia glided across my eyes. Pictures formed in my mind: vague visions of enormous tentacled hydra, whorling maelstroms of impossible hues, winged demons and ambulating giants with features too grotesque to contemplate.

These apparitions terrified me, not because of their alienness but rather because of their familiarity. I felt that if I could view them more clearly, break through the veil of obscurity

that prevented me from seeing all the horrible details, I could match these blasphemous monstrosities to the words that had summoned their images, which even now filled my stomach with sick loathing.

A black circle rose up amidst the vile creatures, its size impossible to gauge but which nevertheless gave an impression of enormity, of unimaginable height and width. Flaming bursts of violet, red and purple surrounded it like a demented corona around an ebon sun. The center of this disk bulged toward me as if a great weight pressed against it from the other side.

The other side of what? I wondered.

A strange compulsion filled me, an unnatural desire to see what lay beyond that sinister sphere, even as a part of me screamed to run away, to avoid touching it at all costs.

I reached out a hand toward the disk.

Something touched me, and I screamed.

Chapter Seven

"Hey, Sean. What brings you down here?"

I stumbled to the side, still straddling the line between the real world and the hallucinatory realm of the giants. Light and dark fought for supremacy in my head, with light ending up victorious as Melissa's radiant beauty swam into focus, backlit by the healthy yellow of the sun, framed by the deep azure of the sky and sea behind her.

The bright sunshine caused me to blink rapidly, and for a brief moment the darkness returned and a part of me went away, leaving someone—something—in control of me.

"*Uga ye durresh amu enki tiamet!*"

My vision cleared and Melissa still stood there, her face speaking volumes in its impassiveness. I knew I had spoken aloud, but she acted as if I'd merely said hello.

"Damn it!" I ground my fists against my eyes and blindly kicked at the wooden bench. So far gone was I in my fury that I felt no pain from the impact.

"What's wrong?" Melissa's question carried no more emotion, no more concern, than if I'd just expressed trouble over my math homework.

Not that I'd ever had that particular problem.

"What's wrong? Either I'm going fucking crazy or this whole town is. I should ask *you* what's wrong. I spout words in a strange language and you don't even react. A freakin' squid crawls out of my mouth and everyone in the diner acts like they don't see it."

I grabbed her arms, relishing the familiar, normal feel of her flesh. "Look at my hands! I'm turning into some kind of sea creature and no one says a word. You tell me what's wrong!"

"Ow! You're hurting me." Melissa drew back and I let her go, reluctant to relinquish the one thing I knew was real. "No one's crazy, Sean. Maybe you just need to put that brain of yours to use. There's more to life than science or math."

"Huh?" I didn't know what else to say. Her reply was an enormous non sequitur; I couldn't comprehend where her line of thinking was moving. "What are you talking about?"

"There's history, for one thing. New Hope is full of it. You've lived here for years, but you've never bothered to learn about your town. Maybe you should rectify that."

She flashed a quick wink at me, then turned and started down the path toward the park. I could see some of her friends from the track team already there, standing around in

shorts and T-shirts. One of them waved in our direction, although I doubted the girl meant to include me in her greeting.

"Wait," I said. "What does history have to do with anything?"

Melissa tossed an impish grin over her shoulder at me. "History is everything, Sean."

I called out to her again, but she kept walking, flicking one hand up in a goodbye gesture. The sun ignited her hair into a shining ball of golden fire, a comet on a trajectory that left me alone once more, only now my thoughts were more confused than ever. With a sigh, I turned my back to the park. And found myself staring across the town square directly at the library.

My legs were moving before I made the conscious decision to follow Melissa's advice.

Chapter Eight

"The history of New Hope? We've got plenty of books on that subject. Follow me, Mr. Black."

Eleanor Watkins, head librarian of New Hope Library, slid past the long, wooden counter and motioned for me to follow her across the wide expanse of the main reading room. As usual, all the tables were empty; for the most part, New Hope's citizens preferred sitcoms and *Jeopardy!* to academic pursuits. I trailed behind Miss Watkins' skeletally thin frame, the click-clock of our footsteps the only sound in the cavernous room. The towering ceiling and faraway walls paradoxically amplified and muted all noise at the same time, creating a muffling effect that made it difficult to judge where any particular sound came from.

I expected her to stop at one of the many rows of books that formed three sides of the reading room, the fourth taken up by a series of wide windows that looked out over the ocean. Instead, she led me past the thousands of tomes gathering dust in New Hope's least utilized building and into a smaller room filled with cubicles where computers had taken the place of the outdated microfilm machines.

"Where are we going?" I stage-whispered to her, as we continued into a dimly lit hallway I'd never been down before.

"The books you want are in a special section," Miss Watkins responded, her white hair a beacon in the murky light.

At the end of a hall was a single door, marked Authorized Personnel Only. "Go down two flights of stairs," she told me. "The room you want is the first door to the left." She handed me an old-fashioned skeleton key, apparently oblivious to my mutated condition. "You'll need this down below. Take as much time as you want."

She squeezed her small, bony frame past me in the narrow hall and returned the way we'd come, leaving me alone in the gloom.

I thought about turning around and following her. The idea of going into a musty basement and perusing mildewed treatises on colonial history suddenly seemed a poor way to spend a summer afternoon. Besides, what could ancient history possibly tell me about the strange turn my life had taken over the past twenty-four hours? If anything, I needed to be studying science fiction.

But something about Melissa's tone, as if she knew something I didn't, forced me to move forward. I reached out and slowly grasped the doorknob, overcome by a sudden hope it would be locked. If it was, I could go home and forget about whatever was waiting for me downstairs.

However, it turned easily in my inhuman hand and I pushed the door open, accepting that fate had something other than hot chocolate and television in store for me.

A single lightbulb, covered in dust and dead insects, cast a dim yellow glow over the landing. I could just make out a similar light one floor below me. Everything in between was so dark as to be almost in twilight. I carefully made my way down the stairs, gripping the handrail in case I missed a step.

When I'd descended two levels, I exited the stairwell and located the first door to the left. Inside, I found myself in a darkened room. I felt along the wall until I touched a light switch. The room was long, almost as long as the reading room far above me, with rows of books to both sides. With only one direction available to me, I started forward, trailing one hand along the dusty shelves as I walked.

Most of the books rested beneath too many layers of cobwebs and dust for me to read the titles, but occasionally I came across one whose spine bore legible letters. *Cantus Circaeus. De daemonialitate et incubus et succubus. De occulta philosophia. Magia Mathematica. De Vermis Mysteriis.*

My knowledge of Latin was limited to the little I'd picked up in order to understand etymology and taxonomy, but I quickly grasped that I wasn't in the history section.

Incubus and Succubus. The Philosophy of the Occult. Magic and Mathematics. The Mysteries of the Worm.

The room seemed to grow warmer around me, and I remembered the stentorian voice bellowing in my nightmare. *Azathoth! Tulzscha! Cthulhu! Yog-Sothoth! Shub-Niggurath!*

Down in the dark, creepy basement of the library, those words—names?—no longer seemed so imaginary, as if in this room it would be acceptable, even expected, to speak them. I passed another book whose cover was dust free, and considered drawing it from its place on the shelf and perusing the contents. *Malleus Maleficarum.* However, when I reached out for the leather-clad tome, I felt an immediate repulsion to it and quickly pulled my hand away. Continuing forward, I wondered who had been down there recently and what their business with the arcane volumes had been.

Satanists in New Hope? Cultists? A coven of witches? It didn't seem possible. Our town was too small, too familiar with each other's business for anyone to hide that kind of secret.

Then again, the impossible seemed to be happening on a regular basis the past couple of days, especially to me, a thought that gave me no measure of comfort. Suddenly the shadows across the room took on a more sinister quality. Whoever or whatever had been reading down there might very well still be around. I picked up my pace, and it wasn't long before I came upon the cage.

Four walls, each made from a crosshatching of vertical and horizontal iron bars. It appeared to be about fifteen feet in each direction. The nearest wall was in actuality a door, with a metal lock panel very similar to those portrayed in movie dungeons. I pulled on the door, but it didn't budge. For one brief second I felt frustration at having come all this way for nothing, and then I remembered the key Miss Watkins had given me.

The old-fashioned key fit perfectly. The lock made no sound when I turned it, again causing me to wonder how regularly people visited these archives, and for what possible reasons. I took a deep breath and pushed the door open, afraid something would leap out at me the moment I crossed the threshold despite the fact that I could see there was no one inside. When my first step brought on no attack, I gingerly entered the tiny space.

One bookshelf occupied the back wall, with perhaps fifty volumes lining its shelves. Other than that, the only objects in the room were a table and a chair. A small desk lamp sat on the table. All the surfaces were dust free, as neat and tidy as the shelves and tables in the main room.

A quick shudder ran through me. Someone cleaned the room on an almost daily basis.

Why?

I could almost hear Melissa's answer in my head. *Only one way to find out, Sean. Start reading.*

I approached the bookshelf. With each step, a sense of loathing built inside me, a distinct desire to be as far away as possible from those books with their black, featureless covers and untitled spines. But apparently my feet didn't feel the same trepidation; they kept moving me inexorably forward. A sensation of otherness came over me, as if I no longer controlled my body, was instead merely a passenger on a preprogrammed ride.

I reached out and withdrew the first volume from the top shelf. Its cover, some type of dyed parchment or leather, felt greasy and unwholesome in my hands.

Turning on the light, I sat down and opened the book, positioning it under the lamp's cone of illumination.

I opened the book with a shaking hand.

The True History of New Hope
Vol. I
The Beast Arrives

I began to read.

Chapter Nine

I remained in the room until I'd read every one of the fifty-three volumes. I had no sensation of time passing; when I finally returned to the first floor it was well past midnight, but I had no idea what day it was. I didn't feel hungry or thirsty, but my body was consumed by the same exhaustion I knew too well from spending nights on end studying until the sun's glow touched the horizon.

I made my way past the long-empty tables of the reading room. Miss Watkins wasn't at the counter, although a strip of light showed from under the door to her office. I imagined her in there, listening for my footsteps, perhaps on the phone to my parents. How long had she waited there for me? Eight hours? A full day? Had she stayed the entire time or left me alone with my blasphemous reading and only come back periodically to check if I was still in the building?

The idea that she'd been keeping tabs on me didn't seem the least bit outlandish. I no longer felt as if I suffered from paranoia; instead, I *knew* I was the victim of a vast conspiracy.

I walked home through dark, empty streets. New Hope is a small town even by small town standards, and like all burgs and hamlets it goes to bed early, even on the weekends and holidays. Night owls are few and far between in a community where more than half the residents have to be out on their boats by sunrise. But tonight there were no pedestrians or cars out at all; even the Fife and Drum, the most popular tavern in town, was closed, its neon lights dark.

Miss Watkins must have been very busy on the telephone.

The houses around me could have passed for abandoned, their black windows hiding barren, dusty rooms and ancient ghosts. They didn't fool me; I could sense the presence of people within, pressing themselves into corners and shushing children as I walked by. *I* was the evil, threatening presence, not these shuttered, cowering domiciles, and they, and their inhabitants, felt it as much as I did.

My own house was no different. No homey, flickering glow of a television in the living room or Owen's bedroom; not even a sudden burst of dim light as someone opened the refrigerator for a late night snack.

Just a dark, depressing silence, a palpable absence of love. When I entered, only dead air greeted me, only fear bade me welcome.

They were awake, those so-called members of my family. I knew this not from the sounds or movements they made behind their closed doors, but rather the ones they didn't make. Owen's mattress didn't creak as he tossed from one side to the other, as hyperactive in slumber as he was awake. The bull-snort sounds of my father's snoring didn't echo from the walls of the upstairs hallway.

No, they were awake, and waiting, just like a thousand other people in New Hope.

Let them wait.

I thought of opening their doors, shouting "Boo!" or "Here I am!" Would they scream in fright? Would Owen piss his pants and cry? Would my father clutch his chest as his heart exploded from terror? I decided I'd rather not know, and I simply made my way down the hallway to my own room.

I pulled off my clothes and crawled under my covers, hoping desperately to wake in the morning and find the past few days had been nothing but a nightmare.

Sleep claimed me before my head fully settled on my pillow.

Chapter Ten

The enormous expanse of featureless landscape stretched before me once again. The plains of Leng, I knew now, although where those particular plains, and the planet they occupied, might actually be was as much of a mystery as before.

Depraved clouds hung in repellent masses from the sky, unwholesome crimson lightning issuing from one to the next. The black disk, more dreadful than in my previous visions, occupied a large section of the heavens, the coruscating waves of foul energy flaring and diminishing in strobe-like fashion around its perimeter.

Words came to me, their very presence on my tongue creating an unpleasant flavor in my mouth, a taste of otherworldly corruption.

"*IA ZI GURRA KAAPA! ANU TULUMUUN TIAMAT! WAAYR AZATHOTH!*"

Searing pain ran down both my sides. I looked down and saw my skin bubbling with boils and pestilent sores that oozed foul ichor. As I watched, my flesh parted, peeling away from my bones like roasted meat. Writhing tentacles erupted from my rib cage, casting away the remnants of what I was and revealing that which lay beneath. Squid-like appendages, too long to have remained hidden inside my human shell, burst forth in all directions.

"Prepare the Gate!" I cried out in a voice much deeper than my own. "*Cthulhu! Hastur! Yig!* Summon thy forces and prepare to rise again. The time of the Wakening approaches. Those that wait Beyond shall wait no more!"

A growling, stentorian thunder rolled across the inhospitable plain and vibrated underfoot in subterranean response. The ground before me cracked open in violent fashion and gouts of rancid, polluted fluids spurted upwards, their stinking presence defiling the already tainted air even further. I choked back bile as the thing within me breathed, relishing the poisonous atmosphere, and—

—I woke, my hands clutching at my chest, my breath rattling in a throat still burning from the memory of Leng's fetid air.

In the predawn light, shadows and shades of gray occupied my room like ghosts, turning it into a faded photograph whose colors had been sucked away by passing years.

I took a deep breath of the clean, unsoiled breeze wafting in through my open window.

Something moved in the shadows. My heart kicked into overdrive with a *thump!* before I discerned it was no monster lying in wait for me. Melissa sat at my desk, staring at me with

the same empty gaze she'd had the day before.

"You know." My tone was as dead as her eyes. It was an accusation, not a statement. For the first time in my life, I felt truly angry with her.

"The whole town knows, Sean." She moved her chair closer to the bed, her face never losing that blank, reptilian look. "You must be aware of that by now."

"How long?"

"Have I known?" She shrugged. "Since before we moved to New Hope. In fact, it's *why* we moved to New Hope. Your parents moved here for the same reason. The whole town is here because of you, in a way."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't. No one could. Did you read all the texts?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I was struggling to keep from screaming at her. I wanted to run through the room, breaking everything in sight. The only thing that kept me on the bed, immobile in my cocoon of reluctant acceptance, was the realization that it would do no good. Fate had me firmly in its grasp.

"Then you know it's not an exact science. Would it be this year? Last year? Next year?" The corner of her mouth curled up in a wry smile. "Hell, would it even be you? It could have been Owen. Or even your own child. All the hundreds of years of planning, of watching, and all anyone could predict was that it would be someone descended from your parents. Can you imagine trying to explain that legacy to you, to anyone, in a sane fashion?"

I took a deep breath. Sane? Nothing was sane about this. "So now what?"

Melissa shrugged. "Now we wait. The next step is up to you. You can either fight it or accept it. If you accept it…" She leaned forward, placing her hands on my legs. The thin blanket was no barrier to the sensual feel of her rubbing me. "Then anything you want can be yours. You'll have access to powers you've never dreamed of, and the freedom to do with them what you wish."

Her hands moved further up my body, caressing my most vulnerable areas. Against my will, I found myself responding, her gentle touch blending together with my memories of a special night in my backyard two summers ago, a night of exploration that ended with us taking each other's virginity. "An experiment", Melissa had called it afterwards. Two friends learning the biology of sex. She wouldn't date me, though, because she felt it would ruin that same friendship. I'd been heartbroken at her rejection, but it was still the most magical and wonderful night of my life.

And it was the most secret of secrets of hers that I carried, because she'd never let

anyone do that again. In fact, she'd told all her boyfriends she was a virgin and intended to stay that way until marriage.

Now she was looking at me with something in her eyes I'd never seen before, something that said virginity, even fake virginity, was no longer an issue. She confirmed it with her next words. "And of course, you'll have me. If you want me."

I did. She knew it. I saw something clearly now. Her whole relationship with me had been an act, designed to bring me to this very place. The friendship, the puppy love, the night of experimentation. Then the pulling away, staying close enough to keep me interested but distant enough so there was no chance of us having a real romantic bond that might lead to me possibly falling out of love with her after only a few months, as teenagers can do so easily. And no chance of her wasting her time if it turned out I wasn't the One.

She'd played me for a fool, used me, set me up. I should have been furious with her, but instead I only felt anger toward myself for being so easy a mark.

Worse, I wanted to pretend I didn't know she'd duped me, just to keep her hands plying their magic on my groin.

"What if I fight it? According to what I read, it's been done before." I knew the answer, but I had to hear it from her.

"That way lies madness, and death, for you. Even if you succeed, you'll only be delaying the inevitable." Her palm slid away, back toward my knee.

"A delay of ninety-nine years."

"We've waited that several hundred times over, Sean. We're nothing if not patient."

By "we", I knew she meant the descendents of the original Followers of the Old Ones. Even after all the centuries since the great wars had resulted in the banishment of the Elder Gods to the far reaches, victims of internal strife and mankind's unexpected revolt, pockets of worshipers still existed. Tiny groups populating small towns like New Hope, located in mystically aligned places around the globe, vortexes of otherworldly energies.

Through a freak confluence of genetics, time and place, I was the potential earthly vessel for the one unholy deity who held the power to open the Gates to the Other Realms and bring forth the Elder Gods once again, a resurrection guaranteed to turn the Earth into a nightmare hell of chaos, bloodshed, and destruction. I was the key that could either open that door or close it for another century.

Melissa's hand slid under the covers and resumed stroking me. I thought about my life: forever the outsider, separated from others my age by the twin faults of high intelligence and a love of science, two crippling attributes for a teenager. What would my future be if I

remained loyal to my race, to humanity? Another year of torture in high school, followed by college, where I'd similarly be a freak because of my young age. Then graduate school, and a research position with a big company. A wife, if I was lucky.

That's if I even lived that long. According to the tomes I'd read, the struggle to control the demons within usually led to insanity.

Or, I could be the king of the world.

Savior or destroyer.

How did one make a choice like that?

Chapter Eleven

"I have to think about this." Pushing the girl of my dreams away from me was one of the hardest things I'd ever tried to do, especially when my hand brushed against one of her breasts.

Melissa glared at me. "Don't take too long, Sean. The thing inside you isn't known for its patience."

Ignoring her threat, I rose from the bed and left the room. I needed air; I needed to be away from her and my so-called family.

The summer air caressed my body as I walked down the hill toward the waterfront. This time I bypassed the benches and kept going. When I reached the piers, I climbed down the sagging, dirty steps to the small stretch of rough beach. During the day it was an unpleasant place to go; the stink from the fishing boats and lobster trawlers settled there, a miasma of dead seafood and diesel that only the ever-present seagulls seemed able to put up with.

But at this hour of the morning, with the sun still waking from its own sleep and the fishing boats resting silent in their berths, the air was pure and unsullied, washed clean by the ocean breezes. At times like this, the beach became a haven of quiet solitude for me, and many were the nights—or mornings—when I'd go there just to think.

I sat down on the damp, gravelly beach, my head spinning from all that I'd learned, while another part of me, the part Melissa had woken with her sensual touch, cried out for further attention.

I dug my fingers through the coarse sand as I considered the conflicting choices that lay before me. As much as I considered myself an outcast, I still identified with humanity at some level. My intellect and my gift for science set me apart from most other teenagers as surely as my lack of desire to play organized sports or spend my nights swilling beer behind someone's house.

For as long as I could remember, I'd yearned not to be a part of the crowd—because, after all, the "crowd" was basically nothing more than the lowest common denominator when it came to intelligence—but something apart from the crowd yet still able to interact with it. I accepted my differences. What I wanted was for the people *around* me to accept them, to recognize that what I had inside my head was every bit as valuable and important as athletic ability or movie-star looks. The fact that pretty much anyone under the age of

fifty considered me a freak—dork, geek, brainiac, nerd, take your pick of insult—was what infuriated me.

So the idea of becoming a vessel of infinite power, filled with thousands of years of arcane knowledge gathered from multiple dimensions, held more than a little appeal. Much more. Even now, with the images and words of distant Leng still racing through my head like dragonflies on speed, I could already access formulae and picture intricate machines whose purposes were unfathomable but blatantly menacing. I knew that if I gave in, conceded my humanity, all the combined scientific knowledge of the Elders—and all the power that went with it—would be mine, and I would become as a god myself when compared to ordinary humans. The very idea was intoxicating; why struggle for years in the hope of discovering something new, of making a difference, when with just one simple act of surrender I could surpass the combined knowledge of the entire human race?

Your race, that other part of my mind, the *human* part, reminded me. Yes, my race. Did I really want to be the Destroyer, be responsible for wiping out or enslaving all of mankind? I'd never had much use for religion, but surely whatever god existed had a special place reserved in Hell for someone who'd practice genocide on such a grand scale.

Then again, how did I know there even was such a god? Maybe the Elder Gods were the only true gods.

My hand came in contact with a round rock, its surface worn smooth by eons of waves polishing it. I picked it up and tossed it as far out into the ocean as I could, trying to transfer my frustration, confusion, fear and lust into physical release so that I could consider my problem with a clear head.

A moment after the rock landed in the water, a second noise reached my ears.

I stopped breathing. Another sound, farther away. A dark, menacing sound.

The ocean isn't quiet; even a deserted beach is filled with sounds: the shushing of waves rolling in and out, the *splish-splunk* of the occasional fish breaking the surface, the rattle of crab claws against stone.

What I'd heard was none of those.

My pulse pounded in my ears and my lungs started reminding me that it was time to breathe again, but I continued to wait.

Five seconds.

Ten.

There. I heard it again. A wet grunting, like someone talking with a mouthful of water.

"*Ree-aighht*."

I got up and walked to the edge of the water.

The words were clearer. Closer.

"*Eee aaiighht.*"

Something moved atop the surface, twenty or so yards away. I squinted my eyes. Was that a round shape, like the top of a head? All I could see was a black silhouette against the nearly black sky.

"What do you want?" I whispered.

"*Eeee wait.*"

We wait?

"Wait for what? What do you want?" This time I shouted it.

My only answer was the shush-sliding of the waves. It was all I needed; I knew the answer.

The creatures beneath the waves were biding their time, waiting for one thing, and one thing only. *Me.* Only I had the power to set them free, let their evil loose upon the world. Or keep them locked away for another century.

I considered this. Took a deep breath.

And made my choice.

Chapter Twelve

Melissa was still sitting on my bed when I returned. She didn't speak as I sat down next to her and took off my shirt.

Leaning back against the wall, I surrendered to my selfish urges and let the being inside me come forth. Grotesque tentacles burst from my body in a spray of clear, sticky fluids; unlike my dreams, it was painless, pleasurable even, like being freed from clothing two sizes too small. The squirming appendages lashed out and wrapped themselves around Melissa, pulling her toward me in an alien embrace. She didn't struggle; instead, she smiled and gave herself to me, her expression a mixture of rapture and victory.

Mouthlike suckers, ringed with tiny teeth and rough tongues, tore her clothing away so that by the time the twisting coils withdrew into the earthly vessel that was my body, her hot flesh was pressed against my own cool, clammy skin.

I held her tightly with my human hands while intumescent projections, extensions of another part of my body—a more appropriate part, under the circumstances—grew forth and penetrated her, front and back simultaneously.

"Nyarlathotep," she moaned, and for the first time in days, I saw an honest emotion on her face.

Adoration.

Chapter Thirteen

When Melissa and I woke up two days later, the morning sun cowered behind a curtain of vulgar clouds, their unpleasant appearance mirroring the world around us.

Melissa made no comment about my appearance when we woke, nor did she shy away when I stroked one long, black nail down her arm, drawing beads of blood from her ravaged flesh. If the numerous cuts and bruises I'd left on her skin during our hours of passion hurt her, she kept silent about it.

Since my discovery and acceptance of who I was, I hadn't seen my family once. Now, as went downstairs, we found my parents waiting for us in the kitchen, standing on either side of the table where we'd shared so many meals.

The same table where my brother Owen's body now lay, carved open from neck to groin, his exposed organs steaming and fresh.

"My son," my mother said, the bloody cleaver still in her hand.

I nodded, still unsure of how I should react to the sudden fealty being paid to me. Melissa nudged me with her elbow.

"The sacrifice is for you, my love," she whispered.

The sight of my brother's butchered carcass didn't repulse me, but I also had no idea what to do with it. Then, like the time in the diner, my body reacted instinctively, knowing what it needed. My chest split open and a tentacle uncoiled. It wavered over the body for a moment, then homed in on Owen's liver, which it plucked out with one strong tug. Wrapped around its prize, it withdrew back inside me and the bloodless wound in my chest sealed itself again.

A warm, satisfied feeling filled me, as if I'd just finished Thanksgiving dinner.

"Come, my love," Melissa said to me. "It's time to see your town."

Hand in hand, we walked out into the world I'd wrought.

Chapter Fourteen

As we walked through town, heading toward the waterfront, I could see how New Hope had already begun to change, reacting to the corrupt energies enveloping the island, energies that emanated from me, although my ability to control them was still only in its nascent stage.

Paint peeled from buildings that had previously gleamed clean and fresh. Lichens and mosses, colored in offensive greens and browns and ochres, created slimy coatings on the walls of many structures. Queer-looking vines, with sharp hooks and bile-yellow leaves, crept up walls and staircases. Some of the alien flora moved of its own accord, weaving back and forth like botanical cobras despite an absence of wind. Structures that just a few days before had stood tall and proud now displayed crumbling stone and bricks, and black, gaping holes occupied spaces that previously held plate-glass windows. Inside stores, clothing and other goods sat covered in mold and rot.

The sidewalks we walked upon, like the roads we crossed, had deteriorated as well. Fissures and cracks ran in all directions, crossing each other in arcane patterns, some of which I recognized from my readings as words and symbols written in the Old Language.

The changes weren't limited to the town. I trod upon the broken ground in my bare feet, which had grown too large to fit comfortably into shoes. Like the rest of me, their flesh was gray and covered in spiderwebs of bulging, greenish veins. Translucent webbing filled the spaces between my toes and fingers, and all my nails had turned black and sharp. Most of my hair lay in clumps back on my bedroom floor; only scattered tufts still sprouted from my head, sticking up at odd angles. I'd glanced in the mirror before we'd left, so although I couldn't see them now, I knew that tiny cilia ringed my mouth like miniature feelers.

The deterioration was worse when we reached the docks. A rancid mist obscured the water, from which issued eerie bellows and croaks as the first dreadful denizens rose up from the depths, harbingers of greater horrors to come. The piers themselves seemed to have aged a hundred years since I'd seen them last; rotted wood appeared ready to crumble under the step of an unwary person, and vile slime grew in large patches. Strings of mucous-coated ocean weeds hung from beneath the piers, occasionally lashing out to snare unwholesome sea creatures. The half-digested corpses of fish peeked out from clumps of the carnivorous seaweeds.

Abandoned fishing boats lay half-beached on the rocks below the seawall, covered in barnacles and other growths up to their rails. The door to the harbormaster's shack hung at a sinister angle from one hinge. Something resembling a giant spider, larger than both my overgrown hands and covered in horny protuberances, had created a home for itself in the doorway, its web composed of fiercely barbed strands.

A repugnant odor drifted in from the corrupted sea. It was the smell of impossibly faraway realms and distant plains, the stink of flesh not meant for the Earth, the contaminated morning breath of insane creatures waking from eons-long sleep.

"How long do we have?" I asked Melissa, as we paused to watch the soiled waves leave their liver-colored foam on the rocks.

She looked out at the rank waters, a tranquil expression on her bruised face. "This is but the beginning. The process is a slow one. Once New Hope has been made over, you'll need to travel to the other places, other cities that occupy similar places of power. Only when that phase is complete can the next steps be taken."

"The opening of the Gate." In my mind, I saw the black disk of my dreams, bulging outward in anticipation. Only now I knew what lay behind it, and what its opening meant for the future of mankind.

"Yes. It will take us many years to prepare the ceremony. Many sacrifices will have to be made, much blood gathered."

"And in the end?"

She shook her head. Her hair, once sunshine bright and full of body, now hung pale and limp about her neck and shoulders. Her flesh displayed the red welts and bruises of our mating like badges of honor, some shaped like fingers, many more like circular mouths.

"Don't think about that. By the time you have to depart your human body, you will have lived far longer than your human lifespan. And even then, you will go on, in your true form. As a god, you'll know no death."

"And what of you, Melissa? You're only human flesh and bone. How long do you have?"

She smiled, showing teeth already growing pointed and sharp. "I am more than that, thanks to you. I will be with you to the end, and give you many offspring."

I reached out my hand. My fingers elongated, and tiny suckers formed on their pale undersides. I pulled her close.

Amidst the corruption and death, I began the process of populating my new world.

About the Author

JG Faherty is a Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award nominee and the author of five novels, seven novellas, and more than fifty short stories. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet, dark 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. His personal motto is "Photobombing people since 1979!"

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How did they get here? Will they ever get out?

Castle by the Sea

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Jason and Erika are having a wonderful time at the Halloween carnival...until their swan boat in the Tunnel of Love capsizes amid heavy waves and blaring, maniacal laughter. When they come to they are no longer in a carnival in Ohio, but standing at the edge of a sea in a raging storm. In the distance, atop a high, barren hill, looms an enormous castle.

Instead of answers, Jason and Erika find only more impossibilities within the stone walls. The lavish rooms are lit only by torches and fireplaces, the decorations and furniture are a century out of date, and the mysterious host claims to not own one of those newfangled telephone inventions. Outside, in the storm and the dense mist, lurk strange, threatening figures. Inside, another couple seeking refuge think it must all be a nightmare. Perhaps it is. Or perhaps it's something much, much worse.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Castle by the Sea:

The carnival appeared without warning, as it has always done and always will. This time it was the residents of Cannonsville, Oklahoma, who woke up on October 30 to find a Halloween carnival set up just outside town. Signs proclaiming *Carnival of Fear—One Night Only!* covered telephone poles, windshields and fence posts everywhere, as if magic elves had spent the entire night doing PR work.

By noon, there wasn't a man, woman or child in Cannonsville who hadn't made plans to attend the festivities that evening.

After all, how often did a Halloween carnival come to town?

The setting sun was no more than a crescent of fiery orange atop the horizon when a tall, skeletally thin man in a multicolored suit entered the Tunnel of Love through a back door. A black stovepipe hat with a sunflower tucked into the band perched jauntily atop the bald dome of his head. Worm-pale lips stretched from one side of his moon-white face to the other in a hideous smile as he stroked a bony hand across the animal-shaped boats waiting for riders.

He stopped at one, a graceful white swan with two seats. "Perfect," he whispered, and the swan nodded in agreement, its eyes glowing red for just a moment.

The Proprietor's impossible smile grew even wider, the ends of it rising past the bottoms

of his ears.

"Ah, what fun Jason and Erika shall have tonight. What fun, what fun indeed."

Flashes of white arced across the night sky, leaving red afterimages in Jason Phillips's vision. In the lightning's wake, thunder crashed with bone-jarring intensity, as if the world were floating inside a celestial kettledrum. Jason gripped Erika's hand and helped her struggle up the steep slope. Each step was an adventure; the freezing, drenching rain had turned the narrow path into a deadly torrent of mud and water that threatened to wash them away at the first careless moment.

Jason tried to keep his mind on finding the right footholds and handholds in the brief bursts of light provided by the aerial pyrotechnics, but his thoughts kept returning to the reality—*or unreality*, he thought—of their situation. The suddenness of their displacement from the carnival, and the ferocity of the storm they'd found themselves in, had prevented them from discussing what had happened, but he knew they'd have to face the facts sooner or later.

The evening had started so innocently. A romantic night at the carnival—they'd intended to see the sights, go on a few rides, maybe grab a candy apple or a corn dog and then head back to Jason's apartment for a very different—but much more enjoyable!—kind of ride. Erika hadn't stopped smiling and Jason, loath to ruin what was turning out to be an amazing time, had gone on ride after ride with her, each one more exhilarating than the last, despite the hour getting later.

Then they'd decided to try the Tunnel of Love. Ordinarily, Jason would have objected—after all, it cost three bucks a ticket and all you did was float in some smelly water for five minutes. However, he recognized it as a chance to make a romantic gesture, something he probably didn't do enough of. So he'd paid the six dollars and they'd let the rough-looking carny with the ragged scar on his face help them into their swan-shaped boat.

Hidden speakers delivered the soft strains of "Muskrat Love"—the perfect corny love song for a corny ride—as the boat slipped away from the dock, taking its place in line behind the other swans. Jason pictured the other riders, some, like him, demonstrating they did have a romantic soft spot. Others trying to recapture their youth. Teenagers looking to perhaps get a little further than usual, cop a feel of a soft, young breast or experience the thrill of that first kiss.

Smiling to himself, he wished them all good luck and hoped that thirty years from now it would be he and Erika reliving their younger days, clasping wrinkled hands and saying

how much they still loved each other.

He put his arm around Erika. She snuggled up against him, and in that moment everything was perfect. The music was no longer trite, the water didn't smell like a mud puddle, and the cheap murals on the walls became as picturesque as a summer garden.

Perfect.

And then the entire world went to hell.

The moment their boat slid into the pitch-black tunnel, the previously calm waters turned rough. Erika had cried out and grabbed on to him as the boat dipped and rose with stomach-churning intensity. Foul water splashed over them, soaking their clothes. Insane laughter burst from the loudspeakers, drowning out the soft melodies with painful intensity. Jason shouted for someone to stop the ride, but the only response was more laughter. The waves grew stronger and stronger until they thought the boat might overturn.

And then it did.

The world tumbled around Jason for an instant before his face hit the water and he went under. He tried to push off from the bottom but his hands and feet touched nothing. Another wave hit, spinning him over and around at the same time until he was so disoriented he couldn't think. Water filled his nose and ran down his throat into his lungs, forcing him into uncontrollable coughs that quickly led to choking when he was unable to find the surface.

There was a moment where he felt pure terror, knowing he was about to drown in a stupid carnival ride.

Then, in the next instant, he found himself kneeling in waist-deep water, Erika on her hands and knees beside him, a horrific storm battering them with rain and wind. Flashes of lightning lit the sky like a giant lamp turning on and off, and he caught sight of land only a few yards away.

"C'mon!" he'd shouted, grabbing Erika's hand. Tumbling and falling in the pounding surf, Jason had led Erika to a beach made mostly of black stones and giant hunks of rock.

That was when they saw the lights at the top of a long hill. Confused and disoriented, Jason had instinctively headed for them.

Erika screamed, pulling Jason's attention back to the here and now. She'd fallen again, her hand slipping from his. He wiped water from his face in a futile attempt to see better; the heavy rain hid everything behind a curtain of gray.

Jason stumbled back down the path until he found Erika clinging to a rock with both hands as a miniature river swirled over her. He said a silent prayer of thanks that she was

still with him. More than once during their climb he'd seen strange shadowy shapes moving through the rain, their forms rendered indistinct by the storm. Each time, the dim figures had faded back into the wall of rain and mist that blanketed the unfamiliar landscape, disappearing before he could get a good look at them. Even when they weren't visible, the feeling of being watched remained.


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