SEVEN SCREAMS

A JG FAHERTY OMNIBUS

SEVEN NIGHTMARES: A JG FAHERTY OMNIBUS

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Previously Published by Delirium Books:
The Cold Spot (2012)
He Waits (2012)

Previously Published by Samhain Publishing:
Fatal Consequences (2014)
Thief of Souls (2014)
Legacy (2014)
Cult of the Black Jaguar (2015)
Death Do Us Part (2016)

"I've known JG Faherty since he was an up-and-comer. Now he's arrived. Start reading him now - as in TODAY - so you won't have to play catch-up later." – *F. Paul Wilson, author of the bestselling Repairman Jack series*

"JG Faherty's stories continue to astound, compel and challenge the parameters of imagination of even the most seasoned of readers. Forever flourishing and growing, Faherty's prose, style and technique comes off as more polished, refined and gripping with each release." – *Dave Gammon, HorrorNews.net*

"Mr. Faherty's writing is excellent. It keeps your blood pumping and keeps your interest up. Brilliant stuff." – *Nev Murray, Confessions of a Reviewer*

"The author has a tremendous talent for appeasing the subconscious executing a solid foundation for plot design and character development... His work is consistent, forever suspenseful, resourceful captivating." – *Rick Ammortis, Hellnotes.com*

"JG Faherty writes in a style that is clean, easy to read, and well-paced. I highly recommend adding any of Faherty's books to your reading list." – *Alice Andersen, Horror Literature Editor, BellaOnline*

"To read Faherty is to immediately become addicted, ravenously consuming one release after another. For those brand new to his efforts, be forewarned there is no turning back and you may wish to sock away a little extra cash for your electric bill from sleeping with the lights on." – *Dave Gammon, HorrorNews.net*

SEVEN NIGHTMARES is a collection of seven of my previously published novellas, which first saw print from 2012 to 2016. They range from quiet suspense to old school pulp horror, but they all have one thing in common: they are best read in the dark! My hope with these stories is to entertain you and send a little shiver up your back. Maybe keep you up at night. I've also added a brief introduction to each one, to give you, the reader, a little glimpse into how each story came to life for me.

As always, there are a few people I have to thank. My wife, Andrea, for her constant support. My parents, who put my first books in my greedy little hands. All the different sets of eyes who read these and helped me get them into publication shape. The editors at Delirium and Samhain who enjoyed them enough to publish them the first time.

And to you, the readers.
Thank you.

THE COLD SPOT

Hard to believe this is the first novella I ever wrote. I hadn't intended to; when I came up with the idea for a ghost who befriends a troubled boy, I thought it would just be a short story. But it kept growing, and I kept coming up with plot twists, and eventually I knew it had to be something longer.

After I wrote it, it sat around for a year or so before I submitted it to Delirium's novella line. It came out in limited edition, and sold out in less than a week. To this day, it remains one of my more popular publications to date.

Clay Daniels sat up in his bed, his hair plastered in sweaty clumps against his forehead, and pressed his hands over his mouth to stifle a scream.

He looked back and forth in the chilly room, certain he'd find the monster from his dreams waiting for him in the dark room. When nothing moved, and no glowing eyes appeared, he took three slow, deep breaths and lowered himself back onto his pillow.

Just a nightmare, he told himself. The same one he'd been having all week, the one with the thing in it, the thing that looked like one of the corpses they find every week on *CSI* or *Bones*.

You're just nervous about starting a new school.

Of course, the fact that the horrible creature in his dream had been pulling itself from a grave had obvious meaning, too, but Clay tried not to think about that. Instead, he stared at the ceiling and waited for the sun to make its daily appearance, same as he had every morning since arriving at his aunt and uncle's house.

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Clay pushed open the door and ran down the sidewalk as fast as he could, wishing he could fly, or run like the Flash, so he could put even more distance between himself and Oakwood's only public school. Even with the noise of his new shoes slapping the pavement and his heart pounding so hard the *thump-thump* of his pulse boomed like gunfire in his ears, he could still hear the voices of his new schoolmates.

"Hey, retard! Did you take the short bus to school?" "Is Clay your name or what your head is made of?" "Hey, kid! You got shit on your face!"

And, of course, the worst one of all, even though he'd expected it, had lived with it all his life.

"Hey, Spot! Wanna play fetch?"

It had taken them all of four periods to come up with the same old name that had haunted him as far back as he could remember. Four

periods— that was actually longer than he'd expected, a sure sign the local educational system was on a level with Piehole's. In other words, a high percentage of paste eaters. As he sprinted down the sidewalk, unmindful of the tears streaming down his face, he wondered how he managed to keep ending up in schools overrun by masochistic dullards.

It was more than a mile from the school to the house where he now lived with his aunt and uncle, and their three children, and Clay never stopped running until he was through the gate and past the broken-down swing-set that occupied one corner of the big backyard.

Only when the grass changed from neatly mown to tall and wild did he allow his body to collapse to the cold ground, where he lay on his back panting like a wild animal, his breath sending steaming clouds into the brisk November air. Colored spots danced in Clay's vision as he struggled to fill his lungs with air. For a moment he thought he might pass out. He'd never run so far in one stretch in his whole life, not even the previous year when he'd tried out for track. Coach had made them run a lot, but he'd also let them catch their breath between sprints.

As the swirling colors gradually faded away, Clay found himself staring at the sky, where mean-looking gray clouds were slowly blotting out the deep blue. He couldn't remember ever seeing clouds like that before; back home in Piehole, Florida the clouds had always seemed friendly, even when a storm was coming in. They might be big and black and ready to dump a shitload of water, but it was always so hot he'd never minded a storm. Of course, hurricanes were another story, but even then the clouds hadn't looked so… cold. It was like the New York clouds were the same as the people, nasty and uncaring.

Something moved at the edge of the forest but he ignored it. Although he'd only been living in Oakwood for a couple of weeks, he'd already seen how the deer and other woodland creatures liked to skirt the edges of the woods as they foraged for food.

A chill from the damp ground worked its way through his clothes and set him to shivering. He wrapped his arms around himself to ward off the sudden cold. The wind picked up, shaking the trees with invisible hands and filling the air with a shushing sound that should have seemed serene but instead reminded him of the way his mother

had always tried to soothe him whenever the other kids would make fun of him.

"I hate them! They're mean and stupid and I hate them!"

"Shhh, honey. They just don't know any better. Once they get to know you, things will be different."

But things hadn't changed. Not in Piehole, and not here in Oakwood, either.

"Hey, Spot! Go fetch, Spot! See Spot run! "

"Why can't they just leave me alone!" Clay slammed his fists onto the damp soil.

Shhh, Clay. You don't pay them no mind.

"I'm not Clay," he whispered to his mother's memory. "I'm Spot. You know it. I know it. Now everyone here knows it, too."

Across the field, the back door to the new home he was stuck with opened and his aunt stepped outside, her bright orange housecoat doing a fine imitation of a flag in the rising wind.

"Clay? Clay?" The stiff breeze captured Aunt Sally's voice and tossed it around like a kite, so that it alternately sounded close by and then far away. The fact that she was calling for him in the middle of a school day meant someone—either his teacher or the principal—had phoned her to say he'd run off.

He stifled a groan; he knew he was in store for another one of Uncle Roy's lectures on how things were run in the Martin household. Followed by the inevitable twittering laughter and snide comments from Tammi, Bud, and Kelly, his three lousy excuses for cousins.

"Screw it." He'd get the same lecture whether he went in now or four hours from now. Might as well try to enjoy part of the day first.

Back in Piehole, he'd always enjoyed wandering around the trailer park, and it was no different here. In fact, one of his few remaining sources of pleasure was exploring the fields and woods that extended for miles behind the old farmhouse. The trees and animals were so different from what he was used to in Florida, where the only wildlife that ever ventured into the trailer park were stray cats, the occasional raccoon or skunk, and fat squirrels that made a living begging from the old folks.

The animals he'd always thought of as common— frogs, snakes, turtles—hardly ever made an appearance in the perpetually cool woods of upstate New York.

Sure would be a surprise to see an alligator right now, he thought, making his way towards the tree line, where his aunt couldn't see him. *If I saw an alligator, I'd bring it to school with me. Then no one would dare make fun of me, or they'd be 'gator food.*

Of course, Clay knew he wouldn't see an alligator. He might not be a genius, but even the dullards in his class knew 'gators didn't come this far north. Now a maybe a bear— Clay paused as another flash of white caught his eye. This time he thought it might not be a deer, after all. Something about the brief glimpse of movement seemed…human, a subconscious impression of an upright figure with arms and legs. But who would be out in the woods in the middle of the day?

"Hello? Who's there?" It could be a hunter, even though hunting season didn't officially start for another month. Bud had told him that sometimes the locals went out and jacked deer, hoping to bag a fat buck before they all moved deeper into the forest in mid-November. But the figure hadn't seemed that tall. Maybe another kid ditching school?

"Hey!" he yelled, stepping between the first trees. The branches of the closely-spaced birches scraped at his clothes. Once into the forest proper, the trees—now mostly elms and maples, with a scattering of pine—grew farther apart and stood taller, their leaves blocking the light and preventing the scrub trees and underbrush from getting a foothold.

More movement, this time only a few yards away. A boy with blond hair and a black concert T-shirt stepped out from behind a tree, one more shadow in the gloom cast by the interwoven branches and the darkening sky above them. He looked to be only a couple of years older than Clay's thirteen. Like Clay, he was thin and rather short for his age.

"Hey," the boy said. He took a few steps forward, close enough for Clay to see Ted Nugent scrawled across the front of his shirt in red letters. "Who're you?"

"Clay. I live over there. At the Martins'." He nodded his head in the general direction of his uncle's house.

"I'm John," the boy said.

"You from Oakwood?" Clay asked.

"Yeah."

Clay stared at him. John didn't look familiar, but considering Clay was the new kid in school, that wasn't surprising. *Especially if he ditched out today, dumb ass,* Clay told himself. Aloud he said, "What're you doing in the woods?"

John shrugged. "Nothin'. We're just hangin' out."

"We?" Clay looked around but didn't see anyone else.

"Yeah. Some of my friends are here, too. Off in the woods someplace, fuckin' around. You know how it is."

"Yeah." Clay nodded, pretending he knew how it was to fuck around with friends, real friends, instead of the family dog or his parents.

And now I can't even fuck around with them. The sudden reminder brought tears to his eyes before he could stop them. He wiped them away on his sleeve, hoping the other boy hadn't noticed, but it was too late.

"What's the matter with you?" John's expression seemed part curious and part bored, as if he was only asking because there was nothing better to do. For a second, Clay thought the boy was referring to the palm-sized port wine stain on his cheek that had earned him his hated nickname. The purple blemish that was the bane of his existence, the reason he hated every waking moment of his life. Then he realized John meant his tears.

"Nothin'." He meant to stop there, but the words, like the salty drops preceding them, burst free with no thought of the consequences. "My parents…they're dead. A fire. I wasn't home, I'd gone to the store to buy comic books. When I came home, it was too late. Even my dog…Now I'm living with my aunt and uncle, and I hate them."

Clay clamped his mouth shut, halting the river of words. *Great. Way to go telling your life story to a total stranger. Now he's gonna think I'm some kind of crybaby.*

John shook his head. "That sucks. When did it happen?"

The tears were flowing unchecked now, uncaring about the color of the flesh they crawled down. “Two weeks.”

“Man, that’s like, totally shitty.”

Just then, the sun found a tiny break in the clouds, creating a spotlight beam of golden yellow that pierced the canopy of autumn leaves and cut a tunnel through the forest’s gloom. The glowing shaft angled down between the two boys and touched John’s arm.

Which disappeared.

Clay stared at the spot where John’s arm had been. There was no stump, no bloody bone sticking out, just a black circle right below the elbow. He felt a scream forming in his chest, but before his lungs could power it, the clouds closed ranks, the heavenly spotlight disappeared, and John’s arm returned, intact and unmarked, his hand still resting against a tree as if it had never disappeared in the first place.

With a rueful expression, John pulled his arm back and winked with one blue eye. “Sorry about that. You know how it is.”

Clay tried to say something, but even though his mouth opened, no words came out. A trickle of hot liquid dribbled down his leg to his sock. He took a step backwards, his mind filled with the screams that remained locked in his chest, and tripped over a broken branch. Right before he hit the ground, John jumped forward and grabbed him with a strong hand.

“Watch yourself, dude,” John said, pulling Clay back onto his feet. As John’s body passed through the light, a vertical section disappeared and then returned, as if he’d been split by a laser and miraculously healed himself.

“Don’t touch me!” Clay yanked his arm free, not caring that his voice had taken on a hysterical pitch. He turned and started running for the field, wanting only to get away from —*the ghost! He’s a ghost!*— the woods and the apparition haunting them.

“Clay, wait!” Something in the spectral boy’s voice brought Clay’s feet to a stop, even as his mind shouted at him to keep going, to run away as fast he could.

“I know you’re scared,” the human-sounding voice said. “But you don’t have to be. We’re…we’re not that different. We like to pal

around and have a good time. You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."

Without looking back, Clay shook his head.

"No!"

He started towards the edge of the trees again, this time controlling the urge to run.

"Okay. But if you change your mind, we'll be here."

Clay kept up his fast walk, never looking back until he left the woods and stood in the comparatively bright light of the cloudy day, a wide space of tall grass separating him from the nearest trees. Nothing moved inside the gloomy, dark forest. No faces peered out at him, no voices called his name. He was alone.

Did I imagine it? Was I dreaming? He placed a hand over his heart, which was still beating double time.

The idea that he'd seen a ghost seemed pretty farfetched, but imagining such a thing wasn't like him, either. Even though he'd spent most of his childhood playing alone, he'd always been more the practical type, the kind of kid who enjoyed a good book about snakes or birds or even baseball rather than a ghost story or scary movie. The only daydream he'd ever had was that one day he'd wake up and his face would look like everyone else's. When it never came true, he'd given up wishing for anything.

A hand came down on Clay's shoulder and this time the scream burst from his throat without a problem. He jumped away, fully expecting to see the ghost named John looming behind him. Instead, Aunt Sally stood there, an angry look on her face.

"Clay Daniels, what the hell are you doing out here when you should be in school? Do you know how embarrassing it is to get a phone call from the principal, telling me you ran off between classes?"

"The other kids were teasing me," he said, fresh tears blossoming in his eyes.

Sally put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Get used to it. That's the way teenagers are. You're the new kid in school. You'll get teased for a few weeks, and then they'll find someone else to pick on."

"It wasn't because I'm the new kid, Aunt Sally. It's because…" He touched a finger to his face, unable to say the words.

His aunt shrugged. "Maybe that's so. But it'll still blow over. This week they're making fun of your face. Next week it'll be the boy who picks his nose, or the fat girl in the back of the class. It's always someone. And no matter how much they tease you, it's still no excuse for skipping school. Now get a move on. You're going to help me with housework the rest of the day. And when your uncle gets home, I'm sure he'll have some things to say as well."

Clay wanted to curse at her, tell her she didn't know what she was talking about, but he kept his mouth shut. What good would it do? His new guardians couldn't control their own dysfunctional children; what made him think they'd understand his special problems? Instead, he clamped his lips shut tight and retreated to his bedroom, where he closed his door and buried his face in his pillow so his aunt wouldn't hear him crying.

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Uncle Roy's lecture went pretty much just as Clay had figured it would.

"Boy, I don't know where you got the idea that going to school is an option. It ain't. Just 'cause you been through some tough times don't mean you can take advantage of the situation to do as you please. You're livin' in our house now, which means you follow our rules. And that means gettin' your ass out of bed tomorrow morning and marching yourself right back to school."

Roy had walked out before Clay could respond, to commence his daily after-work ritual: sitting in his easy chair and reading the paper while Sally cooked dinner and set the table. After his usual three servings, he'd return to his recliner, belly bulging, and watch whatever ball game happened to be on. Baseball, football, basketball, hockey—it didn't matter to Roy, as long as it involved athletes competing against each other. If for some mystical reason no sports were on TV, he'd retreat to his den, where he'd turn on the all sports talk radio station and read the latest issue of Guns & Ammo.

Clay's pulse was still pounding an angry beat in his temples when his cousin Bud walked in without knocking.

"Hey, little man. Heard you got caught ditching school today. Way to go, buttwipe."

"Shut up," Clay muttered, turning away. He could still see Bud's reflection in the window, the older boy's smile somehow just as greasy as his long, unkempt hair.

"Fuck you, cuz." Bud started to say something else, but his cell phone filled the room with the first few chords of Graveworm's 'Living Nightmare.'

Bud flipped his middle finger at Clay as he left the room. "Smell ya later, Spot."

By the time Clay turned around to yell at his cousin, Bud was out of sight, heading down the hall to his own room. Clay caught himself just before he shouted something anyway; the only thing that would accomplish would be another lecture from his uncle and a knuckle sandwich from Bud.

He called me Spot. He's too stupid to have thought of it himself. In all the years I've known him he never said it. That means everyone at school must be saying it, not just the kids in my class. Clay figured one of Bud's friends must have told him, because Bud rarely showed up at school anymore. Both he and his teachers preferred it that way.

"Kids!" Aunt Sally's voice reverberated through the house. "Dinner's ready."

The slam of the back door told Clay Bud was skipping dinner again. Most nights he went out with his friends, a group of class-A delinquents who spent their free time down at Al's Garage, drinking beer and working on their cars.

Heavy footsteps clumped down the hall. That would be Kelly, who had the misfortune to have inherited her father's rotund build. On top of that, she was terminally depressed; she wore nothing but black and spent all her free time in her room listening to dirge-like music from bands with friendly names like Draconis, Magnum Carnage, and Ostia. She trudged past Clay's room without even glancing at him.

Since he'd moved in, he'd only heard her speak on rare occasions, and then only in brief, monosyllabic spurts.

She still managed to annoy him, however. The thin wall between their rooms did nothing to muffle her constant typing on the computer until all hours of the morning. Clay slowly rose from the bed and made his way to the kitchen. Besides Bud's, there was another empty seat. Tammi Martin spent less time at home than her brother, sometimes only appearing long enough to shower, change her clothes, and head out again.

Neither Roy or Sally seemed to notice the way their seventeen-year-old daughter disappeared every night. If they did, they didn't care.

Clay had a good idea what Tammi was up to when not at home. He'd seen through his window how a different boy in a different car picked her up each night. At school, she could usually be found behind the building, smoking a joint while some guy slid his hand up her sweater or down her pants.

But I'm the one who gets in trouble, he thought, dragging himself to the table. *It's like I'm the one who died, and I came back as Cinder-freaking-rella.*

Aunt Sally placed a big pot of stew in the center of the table and started ladling it into everyone's bowls.

"So," she said to Kelly. "How was your day?"

Kelly looked at her mother, her eyes hidden in a dark raccoon mask of black eye shadow.

"Fine." She returned her glance to her bowl and spooned up a big mouthful of stew. Uncle Roy remained silent, his attention focused on his meal, his hand robotically bringing one spoonful after another to his mouth.

Clay thought back to the dinners he used to have with his family. His mother chatting happily about her day, his father laughing over something funny that happened at work. Peppy, his beagle, would be sitting by his feet, waiting for something to fall from Clay's fork. At the time, he'd thought life sucked because of the constant teasing he received at school, and because his parents were too poor to pay for the laser treatments the doctors said might help fix his face.

He hadn't known how awful things could be.

As soon as he finished his meal, he asked to be excused. Uncle Roy flicked his gaze up from his second bowl and then back down again in wordless dismissal. Kelly shot Clay a look of pure disgust, as if he'd broken some cardinal rule by being polite. Aunt Sally at least had the good grace to respond.

"Yes, but no television. You go back to your room and stay there the rest of the night. Maybe tomorrow you'll think twice about skipping school."

With his aunt's greasy stew churning in his stomach, Clay hurried to his room, afraid his face might give away his pleasure at not having to spend any more time with his new 'family.' Even being alone in his room was better company. However, once there, he quickly found that no matter how much he tried, he couldn't keep his mind from returning to what had happened in the woods.

A ghost. Did I really see a ghost? It didn't seem possible, but how else could he explain the boy's arm disappearing? Plus, the apparition had pretty much come out and admitted it, hadn't he? He remembered the dream he'd had the other night, the one about corpses coming from the ground. At the time, he'd thought it was just a subconscious reaction to his parents' deaths, but after meeting John—or this ghost—it took on a whole other meaning.

Maybe John was trying to contact me even then, or maybe somehow I sensed his presence in the woods.

Sitting on his bed, with the lights on and his radio playing low, the idea didn't scare him as much as it had back when it happened. He replayed their conversation over and over in his head. The spirit named John had spoken like an ordinary teenager; had, in fact, been more friendly than most of the kids at school. No matter how much Clay thought about it, he couldn't remember anything the ghost had said or done that seemed remotely threatening.

He was beginning to feel he'd acted like a real wuss by running away.

Just like I do all the time. God forbid I ever act like a man, instead of a scared little shit. I can't even handle it when people call me names.

Thinking about name calling made him realize something else about his spectral encounter. Not once had the ghost in the woods—was he already accepting that as a fact, not fantasy?— commented on his face. In fact, the spirit hadn't even stared at the mark, the way most people seemed to when they talked to him.

Is that because the dead don't care about physical looks? Or is it because he has something in mind, something that involves me joining the dead?

John's words took another spin through his memory. *"We like to pal around and have a good time. You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."*

Even the dead have more friends than I do, apparently.

He realized the invitation was there; John said they'd be in the woods if he changed his mind. Could a person actually be friends with a ghost?

Clay put on his pajamas and crawled under the covers, even though it was only seven-thirty. Staring at the ceiling, he spent the next few hours pondering the idea of making friends with the dead.

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Clay was teetering on the edge of sleep when he heard the noises. At first, he thought it was just music from Kelly's room next door. It wouldn't be the first time she'd left it playing all night long. Then he heard them again. Laughter. People talking.

Outside.

Thinking Bud and his degenerate friends were out in the yard, Clay got up to look. Not that he'd have the balls to say anything, tell them to shut up and let him sleep, but if they were going to keep him up, he might as well see what they were up to. God knew it couldn't be anything good.

A chill ran through him when his bare feet touched the cold wood floor. Uncle Roy's idea of heating the house wasn't much different than his ideas on personal hygiene: a little bit goes a long way.

Then Clay looked out the window and his whole body froze.

John and three other teenagers were down on the lawn, holding cans of beer and staring up at Clay's window. Frost sparkled on the grass, making it seem like someone had coated the entire lawn in sugar crystals.

"Clay!" John pointed at him. "C'mon down. I told the guys about you. They wanna hang."

This can't be happening. A shiver ran through Clay that had nothing to do with the cool temperature in the house.

I've got ghosts standing outside my window, who want me to hang out with them. How crazy is that?

How crazy was it that he was considering their offer?

Don't do it! the rational part of his brain shouted. And it made sense. But the idea of actually talking with ghosts, experiencing something supernatural, was too good to pass up. He motioned for John to wait, then ran back across the room, where he hurriedly pulled on the clothes he'd worn to school that day. A glance at the clock showed it was just after midnight; his aunt and uncle would be sound asleep. Kelly would be lost to the world, staring at the computer screen, headphones covering her ears. However, Bud and Tammi would still be out, and might come home at any 38 time. If they caught Clay leaving the house, or saw him outside, they'd tell for sure.

He hesitated, wondering if he should just go back to bed. He was in enough trouble already. No need to add to it.

Fuck 'em. Just thinking it made him feel better, as if he was actually standing up for himself. Why shouldn't he have some fun?

Excited by his new-found gift for defiance, he tip-toed down to the front door, where he paused just long enough to slip on his jacket and a knit hat. Then he was out the door and into the frosty night air.

When Clay turned the corner of the house, John and his companions were waiting for him, smiles on their faces and beers in their hands.

"Hey, buddy," John greeted him. "I knew you wouldn't chicken out. These are the guys I was telling you about."

The ghost gestured at the other three teenagers, spilling some beer in the process. Clay noticed the beer actually splashed when it hit the ground, melting away the frost where it landed.

The beer is real. How do ghosts drink real beer? Where does it go?

He remembered back in the woods, when he'd tripped and John had grabbed him. The ghost's grip had been firm and strong. And solid. Clay opened his mouth, but no words came out. If the others noticed, they didn't say anything about his temporary muteness.

"Clay, this is Chuck, Ricky, and Brian. We been best buds since, man, it seems like forever."

Clay raised his hand in a weak greeting.

"Hey."

The three other boys responded with variations on the same theme— "Yo," "Hey," "What up?" Then everyone stood around in an awkward silence.

Clay used the opportunity to examine the three more carefully. Chuck was the tallest, with red hair and freckles that stood out like measles against his pale skin. Ricky had long, midnight-dark hair, down to his shoulders, and eyes that were just as black. Brian wore his hair in a crew cut and had an earring in his right ear. Like John, Ricky wore a black concert tee, a giant fist grabbing a rainbow with a castle in the background. Chuck had on a nondescript plaid button-down shirt. Brian wore a plain blue hoodie sweatshirt. All of them wore jeans, but none of them had on coats or hats, even though it was close to freezing.

"Aren't you guys cold?" The question escaped Clay's mouth before he even thought about how dumb it was.

"Cold?" Chuck laughed. "Dude, we're always cold. Bein' dead is like living in a deep freeze."

Clay's stomach dropped down into his guts.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Three seconds and you're already acting like a dork!

"Ha!" John reached out and smacked Chuck on the arm. "Good one, Chucky."

Then he turned to Clay. "Don't let him bother you. He's always been a wise-ass. Wanna beer?"

"I, uh…"

"Sure you do! Ricky, give the boy a beer."

Clay glanced at the house. It was still dark, but with all the noise… "I don't know. My aunt and uncle…"

"Right! I forgot." John motioned to the others. "Pack it up, boys, and let's go someplace where we can par-tay!" With his arm around Clay's shoulders, he led the way across the lawn towards the woods.

"Where are we going?" Clay asked, accepting a beer from Ricky. When he opened it, icy foam spilled over his fingers. His first sip was tentative; he hadn't tried beer more than once or twice in his life, and both times it was sly sips from cans leftover after a barbeque or poker game. Those tastes had been sour and warm. But the liquid in his mouth now was so frigid that it slid down his throat like an ice flow before he could even taste it, leaving behind only a trace of bitter, almost metallic flavor.

"This place we hang out at," Brian said from behind them. "Nobody's there this time of night, and the cops never hassle us."

"Can they even see you?" Once again, Clay prepared to kick himself for speaking without thinking. Who knew what ghosts found insulting? Or worse, what might piss them off?

"Anyone can see us at night," John said. "It's different in the daytime, 'cept in the woods, where there's a lot of shade, like today. Even then, an adult might not have noticed me."

Clay wanted to ask why adults had more trouble seeing ghosts, but just then they reached the woods and John told Clay to pay attention to where he was walking.

"Don't wander off the trail, or you might get lost."

"How come you hang out in the woods?" Clay asked, as they started down an overgrown dirt path. It didn't escape his notice that he was the only one who seemed to be getting snagged by low-hanging branches. Chuck held up his can of beer, which remarkably he hadn't spilled.

"What happens if someone stops us because they see a buncha kids drinking in the middle of the night? How do we explain to the cops who we are, or why we disappear in the daytime?"

"Who are you?" Clay asked the question that had been burning in his mind all night. "How did you end up as ghosts? Do people know you're… you know…?"

"Dead?" John gave a soft chuckle. "Our families know, that's for sure. As for the other stuff, well, we can't tell you. Not yet. It's a secret, and you gotta do more than just have a beer with us before we can let you in on it."

He gave Clay a slap on the back. "Nothin' personal, just, you know, some things you gotta earn. Dig?"

Clay nodded, surprised he didn't mind not being told the boys' secret. If someone had said that to him in school, he'd have been depressed for days, convinced it was just another example of how he got excluded from everything, because of his face. But with John and the others, he didn't feel that way. They treated him the same as they treated each other, kidding around, including him in the conversations as they walked through the woods. Never a word about his birthmark. No insults, no nicknames.

Like an equal. The thought made him smile.

The path meandered back and forth, curved over a hill, and then flattened out. Clay figured they'd gone about a mile when the trail suddenly widened.

"What's back here?" Clay asked, following behind John.

"Only the coolest place in town," Chuck said, and the others laughed.

"C'mon." John gave Clay a friendly smack on the shoulder. "You're gonna dig it."

They walked a little further and came to a clearing. John stepped to the side and spread his arms.

"Here we are. Party central. Whatcha think?"

A shiver ran through Clay that had nothing to do with the crisp night air.

"It's a cemetery."

"You bet your ass!" Ricky pushed past him and sat down on one of the tombstones. Like the dozen or so others in the clearing, it leaned drunkenly to the side. From where Clay stood, the tiny cemetery

resembled a mouth filled with gray, crooked teeth, the gaping maw of a giant waiting to swallow him.

John, Chuck, and Brian took seats, and John waved to Clay.

"Pop a squat, dude." He pointed at the ground. "Don't worry, they won't complain."

Clay swallowed hard. Something inside him warned to stay out of the circle.

What's the harm, though? he asked himself. It's not like anything here can hurt me. Besides, John wouldn't let anything happen to me. Stop being such a chicken!

He entered the circle and almost immediately felt a cold breeze swirl around him.

"What the…?" His body gave an involuntary shiver, so bad he almost dropped his beer.

"Yeah, kinda hits you hard the first time, don't it?" John motioned him forward. "Don't worry, you get used to it."

Clay took two more steps, stopping by a tombstone so old the carvings on the front were worn away to faint lines. The unearthly chill seemed to come and go, a supernatural breeze that only existed within the cemetery.

Taking a seat across from John and Chuck, he sipped his beer and frowned.

"How come it's so cold here?"

Ricky spat on the ground. "Ask our—"

"That's part of the secret," John interrupted, casting an angry glare in Ricky's direction. "Don't worry, you'll find out soon. We just want to make sure we can trust you."

"Oh." Clay felt a bit of the old rejection surface. Maybe ghosts weren't better than real kids. John got up and put an arm around Clay's shoulder. Even through his coat, Clay felt the chill of the ghost's touch, like wading through a cold spot in a pool or lake.

"Don't take it personal, dude. We like you. You're cool. But we also just met you. Gotta hang out a few times before we know if we can totally trust you, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Hey, don't be like that. I mean it. There's a lot of kids we could have asked to join us, but we picked you."

"Why?"

"'Cause you're like us." Brian tossed his empty can. It hit a crooked tombstone with a loud clank and bounced away.

"Like you?" Clay shook his head. "But I'm—"

"He's not talking about being dead or alive, bro. He means you're out of the loop. Uncool. Friend-deprived."

"Thanks a lot." Clay tried to stand up but John held him in place. Not forcefully; there was nothing mean or angry in his surprisingly strong grip. Just an unspoken request to listen.

"It's not an insult," John said in a gentle voice. "We were the same way. The other kids in school didn't like us 'cause we were different. Our teachers didn't understand us. And our parents…well, let's just say they didn't have our backs."

"So what's your deal?" Chuck asked. "How come you're on the outside looking in?"

Clay looked at each one of them. They were all staring at him, not with hate or disgust or belligerence, but with something he wasn't used to seeing. Honest interest. And that was what made up his mind.

"I guess there's all sorts of reasons. My family was poor. I like reading better than playing sports. But the biggest reason is this." He pointed to the discoloration on his cheek.

"Yeah, that would do it," Ricky said, giving Clay a half-grin. "Even when I was in school, kids would've teased the shit out of you. Called you Big Red, or Spot."

"Spot seems to be the popular choice." Clay heard the bitterness dripping in his words, but for once it wasn't accompanied by tears. Talking to John and the other ghosts was like talking to his parents. Or friends. Chuck opened another beer.

"Hell, back in the day we'd have probably teased you, too. We didn't know better. But after you die…well, it's not the same. Different things become important."

"Things like friendship, and loyalty." John gave Clay's shoulder a final shake and sat back down on his own tombstone. "When you're dead, it don't matter what you look like, or how you talk, or who

your family was. We stick together, because we're all we've got. It's us against the world."

"Fuck the world," Brian said, raising his beer.

"Fuck the world!" The others shouted, raising their cans in a toast. After a moment, Clay raised his, too, and the ghosts all cheered him on.

He might not be a ghost, but he sure knew what it was like to have the whole world against him.

But not anymore.

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Hanging out with John and the other boys turned out to be so much fun Clay completely lost track of time. When he finally remembered to check his watch, he was startled to see it was well past two in the morning.

"Aw, geez, I gotta get home before I get in trouble."

The last two hours had been like heaven for Clay. Just bullshitting about whatever subject came up—girls, teachers, cars—was something new for him. Back in Piehole, he'd had a couple of guys he'd hung out with the previous school year, Ed and Neil Bloom. Twins. They'd been total outcasts like him, thanks to their both being total science geeks. The only thing he'd had in common with them was a love of sci-fi movies and nature books. But even that had been better than nothing. Then their family had moved during the summer, leaving Clay totally friendless again.

"No sweat, man. We'll walk you back." John stood up, and the others did the same. During their time in the cemetery, Clay had gotten the impression John was definitely the alpha dog in their little group. You could see it in the way they deferred to him when he spoke, the way none of them stood until he did. Yet at the same time, John didn't actually order them to do anything or act like he expected them to obey him. It was almost as if he was an older brother they respected, and wanted to please, rather than an actual authority figure.

Clay was the last to leave the clearing, and he gasped as the temperature went up several degrees the moment he reached the tree

line. Just as John had said, he'd gotten used to the frigid air in the cemetery, to the point where he'd forgotten about it. He turned around, ready to go back and see if he could find the exact point where the temperature change occurred.

"C'mon, Clay-man." John gripped his arm. "Gotta get you home before you turn into a pumpkin."

Reeling from the beer and the change in reality, Clay followed the others down the path and back to the park. By the time they reached it, his body had adjusted to the November air once more.

"Do you ever go into town?" Clay asked, sticking close to John. Apparently ghosts had no trouble seeing in the dark, something Clay couldn't say for himself.

"Sure, sometimes. That's how we get beer and smokes, you know? The old five-finger discount." He wiggled his hand in the air. "But not too much. Can't have people wondering who we are."

Clay mulled that over. It made sense, but he couldn't imagine having to spend all your time hanging out in the woods. If the ghosts were solid at night, why not go to movies or parties? Of course, there was the problem of having no money, but just the four of them, together all the time? It seemed so…lonely. The idea of it bothered him, but he was afraid that John or the others might not appreciate being asked such personal questions.

The walk back took longer than Clay expected, or maybe it just felt that way because he was tired and cold. His energy returned, however, when they got to his uncle's house and he saw Bud standing on the porch, smoking a cigarette.

"Oh, crap."

"Trouble, Clay-man?" John asked.

"My cousin. He's a real douche. He's either gonna tell on me for sneaking out, or blackmail me. I'll probably have to do his chores for a month."

"You want us to take the heat? Say you would've been home earlier but we kept you out?" Brian had an eager look on his face, one that didn't seem entirely friendly.

"No. It wouldn't matter what time I came home. I was supposed to be grounded. Plus it's a school night. I'll see you guys later."

Clay headed towards the house, fully intending to walk past Bud without saying a word. Let him tell. Better to get in trouble than be a slave. Except things didn't work out that way.

"Hey, Spot. Where ya been? Out chasin' cats?" Bud flicked his cigarette butt at Clay's feet. "Who's your friends?"

Sticking to his guns, Clay didn't answer, just went up the steps. At the top, he had to squeeze between Bud and one of the railings.

"Not so fast, dickhead. I asked you a question." Bud grabbed Clay by the arm, spun him around so his back hit a railing post.

"Ow! Lemme go." Clay tried to pull his arm free. With his other hand, Bud ground his knuckles into Clay's forehead, drawing another shout of pain.

"No way. You're in deep shit, Spot. Your new buddies look like major league assholes."

"You should know." The words left Clay's lips before he even knew he was going to say them. Bud let out a wicked laugh.

"Oh, the little dog thinks he's bad. Know what happens to bad dogs?" Before Clay could respond, Bud's fist pounded into his stomach like a wrecking ball, knocking the air from his lungs and sending him to his knees, doubled over and gasping for air. "They get beat, that's what happens. Get ready, fuckhead."

Clay tried to cover his head but his arms refused to move, staying locked over his howling stomach. Instead, he closed his eyes and prepared for the workboot he knew had to be heading his way.

"Hey, man, leave him alone." Was that John's voice?"

"Stay the fuck out of it, asshole, unless you want some, too." Bud's workbook hit the porch with a resounding thump, inches from Clay's head.

Clay opened his eyes, saw that his cousin's feet were now facing towards the steps. Towards John.

"Big man, picking on a kid half your size. What's the matter, couldn't find a girl to beat up?" Brian's voice that time. Clay

remembered the angry look on the ghost's face earlier. Was he looking for a fight?

Bud started down the steps, cursing a mile a minute. Clay sat up and watched the scene unfolding before him like it was a movie, with him stuck in his seat, helpless to change what was sure to become an even bigger disaster.

Bud charged towards John, who stood perfectly still, as if he wanted to get hit. Bud swung his fist and John dodged at the very last second, the punch just missing him. At the same time, John's own fists lashed out, left then right, catching Bud first in the stomach and then square in the mouth.

Bud fell to the ground. Brian stepped forward, bringing his foot back, aiming it at Bud's neck…

"Brian, don't!" The ghost-boy stopped, his foot poised in mid-air. "Dude, he was gonna do it to you."

Clay thought fast. "Yeah, but how am I gonna explain it?"

Brian looked down at Bud, who was motionless on the frost-whitened grass. His leg quivered. Then John spoke.

"Brian, let it be. Let's go." For a moment, Clay thought even John's words wouldn't be enough to stop Brian. Then he backed up. Sudden lights flashed on, forcing Clay to throw an arm over his eyes.

"What the hell's going on out here?" The front door slammed open and someone stepped out. Squinting against the glare of the porch lamp, Clay saw his Uncle Roy, dressed in boxer shorts and a yellowed T-shirt, looking around the yard. "Clay? What're you doing out here. And who…Goddamn, is that Bud?"

Clay looked down the steps. Bud still lay on the grass. Of John and the others there was no sign, not even footprints. How can they be solid and not leave footprints? The random thought got tossed away as his uncle called out Bud's name.

Do something, idiot, before he wakes up and tells everything.

"I think he got in a fight, Uncle Roy. I heard noises and I came downstairs, and I found him like that. I was coming inside to get you and I…I tripped on the stairs."

Bud chose that moment to let out a groan before rolling over and puking into the grass.

"Goddammit. It's those hoodlums he hangs out with. C'mon, help me get him inside. I swear, if it's not one thing, it's another."

They carried Bud into the house and sat him in the bathtub, where Roy ran cold water on him until he regained his senses. "You're lucky, son. If Clay here hadn't found you, you'd have frozen to death out there. Prob'ly shoulda let you. Teach you a lesson, not to go out drinkin' and fightin'. You wanna tell me who cleaned your clock?"

Bud looked at Clay, who made sure to keep his face impassive. The look in Bud's eyes was pure hatred, but he kept his mouth shut. Clay held a minute hope it was because he didn't want to get his cousin in trouble, but figured it was more likely the fact that Bud didn't want to admit getting beat up by someone younger.

"I don't know, Pop. They got me from behind while I was catching a smoke. Maybe Clay saw them."

Bud shot Clay a narrow-eyed glare, evil enough to kill a cat at twenty paces.

"I…I didn't see anyone," Clay said. "They must have took off before I got there."

"Yeah, must've." Bud stared at him another moment and then pushed himself up with a loud groan. "I'm going to bed."

"Don't think this is over," Uncle Roy said. "You an' me gonna have a long talk tomorrow."

"Whatever." Bud pushed past them and went up the stairs to his room. Clay waited until he heard the bedroom door shut before saying goodnight to his uncle and venturing upstairs to his own room. He also made sure to slide a chair under his doorknob, in case Bud decided to make a late night visit. Only when he was in his bed, replaying everything that had happened in a crazy night, did he remember something that caused him to smile in the darkness of his room.

Clay-man. John called me Clay-man. I have a nickname that isn't an insult. And friends who stick up for me. Still smiling, Clay drifted off.

And for the first time since his parents died, he slept without nightmares.

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School the next day was just as hellish as the day before, but Clay managed to tolerate the teasing of his classmates—just barely—by focusing on the miraculous events of the previous night.

Hanging out with friends and sneaking beer. Getting away with breaking curfew. Watching Bud take a beating for coming after him.

Hard to believe that less than a day ago he'd have thought all those things impossible.

As impossible as having ghosts for friends.

When the final bell rang, signaling the end of another shitty day at Oakwood Consolidated School— whoever decided to put grades six through twelve in one school obviously either never attended public school or was a closet masochist— Clay actually found himself looking forward to going home.

I wonder if I'll see them tonight? That was the one hitch in having ghosts for friends. To see them, he'd either have to sneak out at night, which was dangerous, or hope his aunt and uncle let him stay out late on the weekends, which was unlikely.

Not that it mattered to Clay. Somewhere during lunch, while sitting alone and trying to ignore the kids tossing food near his table while calling out *"Hey Spot! Beg for some treats!"* he'd come to the conclusion that he no longer cared what his half-assed excuse for a family thought. He'd sneak out every night if he had to, or be like Tammi and Bud and just not come home after school.

Fuck the world. His new motto.

All the way home he worked on his plan—should he just not bother going to the house at all, or should he make an appearance and then leave? After staring at the house for a good five minutes, he decided to go in. The day had turned windy and cold, and if he was going to be outside, he wanted warmer clothes. Plus a snack for his growling belly. Intent on finding something sweet in the cabinets, Clay didn't notice the note on the refrigerator until he went to get the milk.

Clay, I went to visit a sick friend in the

hospital. Won't be home until supper.
Your uncle is working late. Don't disturb Bud,
he's resting.
Aunt Sally

Stifling a joyful shout, Clay read the note again, just to be sure he hadn't misunderstood.

Bud's sleeping and no one will be home 'til supper? Milk forgotten, Clay took a handful of cookies, grabbed his coat, and headed for the door. He had three hours of freedom, and he wasn't going to spend them cooped up in the house. Not when there were ghosts in the woods.

Unlike his last trip across the field, this time Clay ran with a purpose, and a light heart. He was hoping John and the others would be there—they hadn't mentioned anywhere else they went during the day—so he could thank them for last night. Then another thought hit him and he stopped, still thirty yards from the tree line. What if the ghosts weren't there? Or what if they were there, but mad at him for the fight? John had also said they had to stay out of trouble, because they couldn't explain their existence to anyone. But then why did they protect me?

Suddenly unsure of what to do, Clay started towards the woods, but more slowly this time. How would he find four teenage ghosts when you couldn't even see them if the sun shined on them? He certainly couldn't search every shadow in the forest.

Stepping out of the sunlight and into the gloom brought on by the canopy of bare branches overhead reminded Clay of the magical cold he'd felt in the graveyard the previous night. Although the temperature drop was nowhere near as drastic, a quick shiver ran through him and he zipped up his jacket to just below his chin.

Now what? He had no answer for his own question. Call out to John and the others? Go left? Go right?

"Hey, man. We were hoping you'd stop by."

Clay gasped and his body jerked involuntarily at the voice. Turning, he found John and Brian standing not ten feet away.

"Uh, hi. Man, you scared the crap out of me!" Clay's heart beat double-time for several more seconds, then began to settle down.

"Sorry, Clay-man. Forgot how quiet we can be. How's your cousin?"

There was sarcasm in John's voice, but Clay recognized it wasn't directed at him. Grateful they weren't upset with him, he allowed himself some sarcasm of his own.

"Oh, Bud's doing just fine. My uncle yelled at him, and then they let him stay home from school today because he didn't feel well enough to go. He's still in his room, sleeping or whatever."

"Fuck him." Brian leaned against a tree and chewed one of his fingernails. "He deserved an ass beating."

That reminded Clay to say thank you. "Yeah, about that. I just wanna say thank, you know? You guys saved my butt last night. Bud would've really…he…"

John came to his rescue. "No problemo, dude. That's what bros do, we look out for each other. We got each others' backs, right?"

"Right," said Brian

"Right on," came two other voices. Clay glanced to the side, saw Chuck and Ricky heading towards them. As they walked in and out of the shadows cast by the trees, different sections of their bodies disappeared and reappeared in rapid sequence. It reminded Clay of the special effects they used in the old Predator movies. Unsure of how to respond—no one had ever 'had his back' before— Clay changed the subject.

"So what do you guys do for fun during the day?"

"We fuck around a lot. Here in the woods, down by the river," Brian said. "As long as we stay in the shadows, we can, you know, chuck rocks at birds, smoke…it's, I don't know…"

"What he means is that even though being a ghost is cool, we miss being, like, solid, too," John interrupted. "In the sun, you can't feel anything or touch anything. Gets kinda boring."

"What's it like, you know…?" A day ago Clay wouldn't have felt comfortable asking, but John's actions had convinced him no one would get mad at the question.

"Being dead?" John gave him a lopsided smile.

"No." Clay shook his head. "I mean, being a ghost. Like, what can you do? Can you fly? What happens when you disappear? Are there other ghosts around?" Aware he was close to babbling, Clay stopped himself.

For a moment, John didn't speak. Clay could see he was concentrating, trying to find the right words. The silence stretched on, broken only by bird sounds high up in the trees and soft *snik* of Ricky flipping open an old-style lighter and lighting a cigarette. Clay saw the lighter's flame was an almost iridescent blue. He hadn't noticed that the night before. Then John started talking.

"It's really hard to describe, Clay-man. It's like you're alive, but no one really knows. You know how there's always a kid in school that nobody notices, no one pays attention to? He's like, there, but he's in the background?" Clay nodded. He'd often wished to be that person. "It's kinda like that. During the day, most people can't see us, even in the shade. That's why I knew you were special, 'cause you saw me right away. In the sun, we're totally invisible but we can still see each other."

"Sort of," added Ricky. "Not like this." He motioned with his arms, indicating the four of them.

"Right." John nodded. "We look sort of blurry and see through. I guess the way most people would picture a ghost. And we can't fly. We walk. Even in the day, we're walking."

"Do you sleep?"

"Naw," Chuck said. "Sleeping's for you breathers. Sometimes, though…"

"Sometimes we kinda lose track," John finished. "Like you go into a daze, and all of a sudden you realize a few hours went by and you don't know how."

"Like History class," Brian said, and all of them laughed, including Clay. Then Clay had another thought.

"When you're invisible, what do you do?"

Brian gave an exaggerated wink. "If you're askin' if we peek into girls' windows, the answer's definitely yes."

"Only in the day, though," John said. "When people can't see us. And in case you were wondering, no, ghosts can't have sex. But we still like to look."

"It sucks, man." Chuck shook his head. "Like havin' blue balls all the time."

"I miss sleeping." Ricky lit another cigarette. "Used to sleep 'til ten or eleven on the weekends. Man, I loved sleeping." He took a deep drag and blew a series of smoke rings, which expanded lazily in the chilly air until they lost their shape entirely and became ghosts themselves. Then he waved the butt at Clay. "On the other hand, at least these things won't kill me."

Clay laughed, but Brian gave Ricky a funny look. "No, that got taken care of just fine by—"

"Can it," John said in a loud voice. It was the first time Clay had ever heard him give an order that sounded like one. Brian closed his mouth, but didn't look happy about it. John stared at Brian until the other boy looked down. Then he turned to Clay, his face and tone relaxed again.

"One thing we can do when we're invisible is keep an eye on people. That's how we knew you were coming to the woods today."

"What? You mean, you were out there while I was walking through the field?" Clay considered the boys his friends, but somehow the idea that they'd been watching him, following him, was kind of creepy. What if he'd farted or picked his nose or something? People did things when they were alone that they wouldn't do if other people were around, even those other people were friends.

What are you worried about? a voice in his head asked. *They're ghosts. They probably don't give a rat's ass about a booger or a fart.*

True. But it still had him feeling weird. John shrugged.

"Not the whole time. We saw you walking home from school, so we headed over here to the woods to see if you'd come back here. We saw you leave the house."

"Yeah, it's not like we were peekin' in your window or nothing," Chuck said. "Don't need to see you spankin' the monkey. Now, maybe that cousin of yours, the one with the big—"

"Chuck…" John warned.

"Naw, it's cool." Clay felt his lips tighten. "She's an asshole, just like her brother. You can say anything you want about them."

"You really hate them that much?" John asked.

"Hell, yeah. When I lived in Florida, the kids at school made my life miserable but at least when I went home, I had a family, you know? And a dog. Now, coming home is worse than being in school."

John nodded, but didn't say anything. Brian put his arm around Clay and said "Life sucks. Not much you can do about it. Could be worse, though. Trust me."

Before Clay could ask what he meant, Ricky came over and gave Clay a friendly punch on the arm.

"Stick with us, Clay-man, and soon your troubles will be all gone."

"Ain't that the truth." Chuck took a cigarette from Ricky, and then offered one to Clay, who shook his head.

"Naw, I don't smoke."

"Don't like it or never tried it?" Chuck asked, lighting up.

"Um…both, I guess. I never tried it because I didn't like the smell." Plus his parents would've killed him if they'd caught him.

But they're dead now. Left you behind.

A sudden thought struck Clay. Were his parents ghosts? Were they back home, still together and happy, or maybe even in a better place, like Father Tortorici had said during the funeral mass? He'd always figured that death was final, regardless of what the Church wanted you to believe. But apparently it wasn't.

Left you behind. Anger erupted in Clay's guts, a churning, steaming resentment towards his parents for abandoning him to a rotten life with his aunt and uncle.

"Fuck it, I'll try one." He took the cigarette from Chuck and let the heavy-set boy light it.

This is your fault, he thought at his mother and father. *You didn't care what happened to me. Now I don't, either.*

He breathed in and let the smoke burn its way through him, the fire in his throat and lungs melding with the fire in his guts until there was nothing but ashes left inside him.

The ashes of the old Clay.

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Clay spent the rest of the afternoon with John and the other ghosts, doing the kinds of stupid, time-wasting things only bored teenage boys did. Throwing rocks at trees. Seeing who could sneak up closest to a squirrel. Arguing about whether big tits or small tits were better. Stupid things, yes, but doing them with friends made them enjoyable. When it got close to five o'clock, Clay reluctantly said he had to go.

"My uncle will be home soon, and he'll have chores for me to do."

"But it's almost dark, dude." Chuck and Ricky fist-bumped at the idea. "Then we can really get the party started. Get some beer. And it's trash night. That means we can knock over the garbage cans of people we don't like."

"Not tonight. I'm still grounded. But tomorrow's Friday, so I can probably go out after dinner."

"Cool. We'll meet tomorrow night at eight at the cemetery. You remember how to get there?" Clay nodded. "All right, then. Later, Clay-man." John gave him a high-five. The others did the same.

That night, even his uncle's snide comments didn't bother him.

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The next day, like most Fridays, was especially bad for Clay. Over the years he'd developed a theory that bullies were more hyper on Fridays, either because of the coming weekend or from having been stuck in school for a week. The reason didn't matter, of course; what did matter was that on Fridays beatings had a tendency to be more violent, insults flew with greater frequency, and teachers— thanks to their own desire to get away from work for two days—had less sympathy for those being bullied.

Gym class: *"Hey, Spot! Fetch the ball!"*

Bathroom: *"You got something on your face, better wash it off."*

Cafeteria, just before a quick foot tangled his legs on purpose: *"Have a nice trip!"*

At his locker between classes: Two swift punches to his thigh, leaving him with a charlie horse for sixth period.

Mrs. Donner, his sixth period teacher: *"No one likes a snitch, Clay. Ignore them and they'll ignore you. Now go sit down."*

It was a double relief to run down the steps at the end of the day. Not only didn't he have to deal with the bullies for two whole days, but he actually had something to look forward to on a Friday night for a change, something other than TV in his room. He was so intent on getting home he never noticed the three boys sitting on the brick wall that marked the beginning of school property. Until they jumped down and surrounded him.

"Where ya goin', Spot?" Billy Henderson asked, his fists already clenched. "You told Donner I gave you a charlie horse."

"Leave me alone." Clay tried to push past them, but Henderson's accomplices, both fat and stupid like Billy, grabbed him. Then there were no more words as Billy waded in, fists pumping back and forth, each one hitting Clay's stomach and chest like a mallet. A veteran deliverer of many schoolyard beatings, Billy knew to avoid the face so there'd be no evidence of his handiwork. Most parents didn't consider belly or arm bruises serious enough to call the school or police.

It was over in three minutes, although it felt like a lifetime to Clay. Billy's friends let him fall to the sidewalk, and the three ninth-graders walked away, laughing as if nothing had happened. None of the other students stopped to help him, or even ask if he was all right.

After a while, he pushed himself to his feet and slowly began the mile-long walk home, each step sending stabbing pains through his belly. He wondered if one of Billy's punches had ruptured something inside him, but by the time he got home, the pain had subsided enough that he figured he was okay. He grabbed a bottle of soda from the 'fridge and went to his room, where he lay down with the cold bottle on his stomach until dinner.

"What are your plans for tonight, Clay?" Aunt Sally asked after their usual Friday meal of chicken tenders and French fries was mercifully over. Tammi and Kelly had already dumped their plates in the sink and gone to their rooms. Bud hadn't even come home.

"I'm meeting some guys at the park." Clay was prepared to argue if she said no, but she just smiled and kept loading the dishwasher.

"So you finally made some friends. I told you the boys at school would stop teasing you eventually."

"Yeah, right." He excused himself and went back to his room, where he donned an extra sweatshirt under his coat and grabbed gloves and a knit hat. The temperature was supposed to go down below freezing, and if they ended up back at the old cemetery, he wanted to make sure he was warm.

"Don't stay out too late!" Aunt Sally called from the kitchen.

"I won't." Considering Bud and Tammi rarely stumbled in before three, he figured the definition of 'late' in the Martin household was loose enough that he wouldn't get in trouble as long as he was back before daylight.

As he stepped out the door, his heart pounded with excitement.

What was in store for him tonight?

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Thirty minutes later, Clay didn't know whether to laugh or run for help. He'd arrived at the edge of the woods an hour after sunset and found John, Chuck, and Ricky standing there.

"Hey, guys," he'd said. "Where's Brian?"

All of them smiled. "Waiting for us. And you. We got a surprise for you, Clay-man," John had said. They'd headed into the woods, following the trail that led to the cemetery.

A surprise? he'd thought. *For me?*

He wondered what it would be. What did guys surprise each other with? Beer? Comic books? Playboys? He'd thought himself prepared for anything.

He'd been very wrong.

Instead of food or booze or porn, he'd found a bruised and beaten Billy Henderson lying on the frigid ground, tied and gagged, with Brian standing guard over him.

"What the…? What did you guys do?"

"Told ya you'd be surprised." John kicked Billy in the thigh, drawing a muffled cry of pain. "We hang out near the school sometimes. Not that we miss going to school, but watching the kids sure beats doing nothing in the woods all day."

John drew back his foot again and Billy whimpered behind the dirty rag they'd stuffed in his mouth. "Saw this asshole fuckin' with you. We couldn't do anything at the time, but wouldn't you know, on our way here tonight we saw this dipshit walkin' all by his lonesome."

Ricky flicked open his lighter and thumbed the wheel. The strange blue flame wavered back and forth.

"Couldn't pass up the opportunity to get him back for what he did. Friends gotta stick together, right? Watch each others' backs." He took out a cigarette and lit it, snapped the lighter closed with a smooth one-handed motion. "Like this."

Without warning, Ricky dropped to his knees and jabbed the cigarette's red-hot tip against Billy's neck. Even gagged, Billy's scream was loud enough that Clay felt for sure it would bring the police. Even as his fear bubbled and swirled in his stomach, the other boys laughed, apparently unconcerned about getting caught.

Chuck stepped forward and slammed his foot into Billy's stomach, turning the ninth-grader's cries into choking, gagging sounds.

"Eye for an eye, douchebag," he told Billy. Brian took the cigarette from Ricky and stabbed it into the back of Billy's hand. A nasty smell filled Clay's nose, the stink of burning hair and skin.

"Maybe that'll make you think twice about punching someone." Brian took a drag of the cigarette and then handed it back to Ricky.

"Guys, that's enough," Clay said. All he could think about was how much trouble they'd get in when Billy told on them. Which he was sure to do. Maybe you didn't rat someone out for a playground fight,

but when people kidnapped you and burned you, that was a different story.

Then an even worse thought hit Clay. Why should John and the others worry about getting in trouble? They couldn't get caught. Only one person in the group was going to get in trouble.

Me.

Clay's legs started trembling and he sat down on a tombstone. He tried to speak, but his first word was only a dry whisper. It took several tries before he worked up enough spit to moisten his throat.

"John. You have to let him go. He's gonna tell his parents. The police. And they're gonna come looking for me."

"No, he ain't." John knelt down next to Billy's face. "You're not gonna tell, are you, Billy-boy?"

Billy shook his head, his eyes wide and bulging. At the same time, he made *mmmph-mmmph* sounds over and over.

"Uh-uh." John looked up at them. "I don't think I believe him. Do you?"

"No," said Ricky. Brian and Chuck shook their heads. "How about you, Clay-man. You think he's gonna tell?"

Of course he is, you idiot, Clay wanted to say, but he no longer felt comfortable enough with his new friends to talk like that. Instead, he settled for something that was still the truth. "I would."

God, what am I gonna do? Maybe I can convince Billy not to tell. I'll give him my lunch money for a month. I'll—

"That's what I thought." In one swift motion, John took Billy's head in his hands and twisted it sharply to one side. There was a sound like a tree branch breaking. Billy's legs kicked once and then he went still.

"Ain't gonna tell now." Ricky let out a hoarse laugh and tossed his cigarette onto Billy's chest.

Clay stared at the body. Thoughts tumbled through his head like blowing leaves.

He's dead. John killed him. Billy's dead. Dead like my parents. Maybe it's a joke. He's faking. They're trying to scare me. He can't be dead. He can't—

A long, wet farting sound came from the body and a foul odor rose up.

"Jesus, that's ripe!" Chuck waved his hands in front of his face while Ricky and Brian backed away. John stood up and looked directly at Clay.

"We did this for you. You're one of us, now. Which means you have to help us get rid of the body."

"What?" Clay half-slid, half-fell off the tombstone. "No…no, I can't. What if we get caught? I'll go to jail. They'll think I killed him."

"You won't get caught." John grabbed him by the shoulders and steadied him. "We'll make sure of that. But we need to know you're not gonna tell. We need to know we can trust you with all our secrets."

"Uh…" Clay looked at the body again. It hadn't moved. It still stunk like a week-old highway pancake. Billy was really, truly, dead.

And the only way I'm not going to get blamed is if the body is never found. A shiver ran through him as the cold truth sank in. He'd witnessed a murder and done nothing. And his one chance to avoid prison was to commit another crime.

"Okay, I'll do it."

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Disposing of a body turned out to be easier than Clay thought possible. Ricky and Brian ducked into the woods and came back with a large black tarp. Seeing it sent another round of shivers through Clay.

They always intended to kill him. He pushed away the idea he was hanging out with murderers so he could focus on doing what needed to be done without leaving any clues to his involvement. He'd already decided never to see or talk to the ghosts again. John had given him a pair of cheap rubber gloves to wear, the kind women used when washing dishes.

"What about you?" Clay noticed none of the four dead boys wore gloves as they rolled Billy's limp, stinking body onto the tarp and

began folding the heavy material around him. Brian took out a knife and some thin rope and started cutting lengths of it.

"No worries here." Brian paused and brought the knife up to his own hair, cut off a handful. He let the clump fall to the ground, where it instantly disappeared. When he looked up at Clay, there was no sign of any hair missing from his head.

"Ghosts don't leave evidence," John said. Clay remembered how none of them had left footprints in the frost-covered grass the other night. He looked around the clearing. Several cigarette butts and beer cans littered the area.

Things they take from the material world can get left behind, but nothing of themselves remains. He assumed there would be no fingerprints on the cans, no DNA on the cigarettes.

Except the ones I drank, the ones I smoked. Shit. Suddenly, what had looked like a simple party site took on the sinister appearance of a crime scene, with all clues pointing directly at him.

I have to come back and clean all this, he thought, as Ricky and John easily lifted Billy's body onto their shoulders.

"Where are you taking him?" Clay asked.

"We are taking him that way." John pointed into the woods, and Clay understood that by 'we' he meant Clay was going with them. "It's not far."

They started down a small path, heading in the opposite direction than the way back to Clay's house, the four of them talking and laughing like they were carrying a bag of leaves instead of a dead teenager. The short walk seemed to take hours, with Clay constantly looking in all directions and listening for anyone following them. He was still afraid Billy's calls for help, or the boys' talking, would attract attention. At the same time, he was too frightened of the ghosts to shush them.

Not long after they left the cemetery the path took an abrupt downhill angle, and Clay realized they were heading to the river that divided the town in half. Although the month of November had been dry, September and October rains had been unusually frequent and the river still ran strong, its rushing and roaring drowning out all other sounds when you stood near it.

John and Ricky dropped the body on the bank and cut open the ropes holding the tarp closed. They unwrapped Billy's body and began stuffing his coat and pants with rocks.

"Give us a hand, Clay. You need to be part of this."

Touching the corpse was the last thing Clay felt like doing, but something in John's voice told him 'no' wasn't an option. He took a few stones and slid them inside the coat, doing his best not to breathe the stench of Billy's voided bowels. When they had several pounds of stone packed, John signaled them to stop. Then he, Brian, and Chuck lifted the body, waded into the freezing water up to their waists, and let it go. It sank before it could float more than three feet downstream. When the three boys emerged from the water, they were completely dry.

"Why didn't you leave him in the tarp?" Clay asked, the question popping out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Muskies." Ricky nodded at the river while he retied the tarp into a small, compact bundle. Clay frowned at the word, and the ghosts all laughed.

"Muskellunge," John said. "It's a kind of big-ass fish that lives in the river. People catch thirty and forty-pounders all the time. Thanks to them, there'll be nothing left of Billy-boy in a few days except some bones. But if we left him in the tarp, he might last for weeks. Or months."

John approached Clay, who stepped back nervously. Pretending not to notice, John put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Look at that river, Clay-man. What do you see?"

"Um, nothing? Just water." Clay wasn't sure where John was going, but he hoped the ghost would get to the point quickly. He wanted to go back to the cemetery and remove any evidence of his ever having been there.

"Exactly. Think about it. Today a fucking douchebag beat you up for no reason. And now tonight, because you have friends who care about you, that douchebag is gone forever. And you're in the clear. Think about it. You honestly believe anyone's gonna think you—the scrawny kid everyone picks on—killed a ninth-grader and got rid of the body?"

Clay stared at John for a moment and then looked at the river again. Something inside him seemed to break open, an emotional epiphany that sent a massive shiver through him. He saw the river in a new way. Instead of a rushing body of water, it was a shower, a bath, washing away the anger and embarrassment and self-loathing Billy and his friends had ignited, washing away the pain of getting hit. The river had cleansed him without ever touching him.

Clay smiled, and John nodded.

"You get it now, don't you?" John asked. "With us, you're free to do almost anything. The old rules don't apply." John's words dampened Clay's joy.

"That's not true, though. You can do anything, but I can't. I still have to make sure I don't get caught. I have to go back and clean the cemetery so no one finds my fingerprints. I'm still human." He turned to John. "But if I was a ghost, like you…"

"No!" John shook his head. "Don't say that. You don't want to be like us. We'd give anything to be alive again."

"Tell him the truth, John. Tell him how we got like this." Ricky was snapping his lighter open and closing it, over and over. *Click. Click. Click.*

John nodded. "It's time you learned our secret, Clay." He paused, and the others moved closer.

"We became ghosts because our families killed us."

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Our families killed us.

The words repeated themselves over and over in Clay's mind, bouncing back and forth like frightened shouts in a cave. He didn't even notice John was still talking until a finger poked him in the shoulder.

"Hey, you there? Earth to Clay."

"Wha…? Sorry. I flaked out. What'd you say?"

"I said, that's why you can't become one of us. It's not just a matter of dying. If it was, everyone would come back as ghosts. It takes

a certain set of circumstances for a person's…spirit…to break the rules, so to speak."

"Being murdered?" That didn't make sense. Lots of people got murdered.

"Not just murdered. Murdered by a close family member. It was my parents who killed me."

"My father," said Ricky.

"My mother stuck a knife in my back." Chuck made a stabbing motion with his fist.

"My aunt and her new husband poisoned me," Brian said. "I was like you, Clay, living with them after my parents died."

"Wait." Clay shook his head. "You guys all knew each other when you were alive?" Chuck and Brian nodded.

"We were in school together," John said. "Me and Ricky were supposed to graduate in seventy-eight. Brian and Chuck were a year younger."

"Seventy-eight? But how… why…I don't understand any of this. You all talk like…like I do. Not like…" Clay's voice trailed off. He had too many questions and they were all fighting to get out, causing a traffic jam between his brain and mouth.

"Some old hippies? It's not like we just woke up from a coma, dude." Ricky flicked his lighter again, felt his pants pocket, and cursed when he didn't find any cigarettes. "Remember, we walk around during the day and no one can see us. We listen to people, watch people. Go to movies. We even go to school."

"Not classes or anything," Chuck interrupted, rolling his eyes. "But we'll sit in the cafeteria during lunch. Hang in back of the school, where the kids always go to smoke or get high."

"We might not know what the top TV shows are, or what kids are listening to on their iPods, but we keep pretty current with how people talk, how they dress, all that shit."

"Yeeah, boyeee, fo shizzel!" Brian crossed his arms and made downward-pointing peace signs, while shrugging his shoulders in a pretty fair imitation of a rapper.

"Ignore MC Casper over there," John said, and the others laughed. "The point is, we stay pretty current, but most of the time that

just makes things worse. Because we can watch, but we can't experience things."

"You can at night." Clay poked John's arm. "At night you're solid as anyone else. You can drink and eat. You could go to parties. Hell, you could steal a car and drive away from here. Go to LA or Miami or anywhere at all."

Ricky and Brian gave each other a strange look, and John shook his head.

"Can't. Something about being a ghost. We're tied to the town where we died."

"Oh." Clay didn't know what else to say. Stuck in a shithole like Oakwood forever? Nothing could be worse than that, not even the whole no sex thing.

"Yeah. So while you might think being dead is cool, 'cause you don't have to listen to nobody, and you can do pretty much whatever you want—"

"At night," Brian cut in.

"—as long as it's at night," John continued, "it's not all that great. Even if you could become a ghost, which you can't."

"I don't know about that. I'm pretty sure Bud would have no trouble at all sticking a knife in my throat if he thought he could get away with it."

"Only one breather in town could get away with that." Ricky clapped Clay on the back. "That's you, buddy. 'Cause you got the ghosts with the mosts at your side."

Before Clay could respond, John tapped his wrist as if indicating the time. "We better get moving. Clay's got some cleaning to do before he goes home."

Climbing the hill back to the cemetery, a thought took root in Clay's head and refused to leave.

I just got away with murder.

Oddly, it didn't bother him at all.

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Clay was still wide awake when the first weak rays of the sun turned the sky from black to gray. He'd gotten home just after three, tired, cold, and filthy. After cleaning the cemetery and burying the cans and butts in several different places in the woods, he'd left the arctic zone he thought of as the Cold Spot. John and the others had stayed behind, saying they'd see him tomorrow night.

His thoughts whirled like eddies along the ocean shore as he stared at the cracks in his ceiling. How could parents kill their children? He knew it happened—he'd seen it in the news, read it in the papers—but it still seemed so…impossible. And to have it happen four times in one town.

What the hell's in the water here?

Actually, he knew the answer to that, now. Dead bodies. Billy's final seconds played themselves back. The way John had so casually snapped his neck. It was obvious he'd killed before. How many times over the years? And for what reasons? To protect a friend? Or get rid of one? Something John had said the first day they met came back to Clay.

"You don't have to be one of us to be our friend."

If that was the case, how come Clay was the only living friend they had? Where were the others? Had there ever been any? Had something bad happened to them? Or was it just that only teenagers could be their friends, and that growing older meant you couldn't see them anymore? Hadn't John mentioned that adults had more trouble seeing ghosts?

Clay tried to imagine how hard that would be, to make friends with someone and then watch them get older while you remained the same. Did the ability to see ghosts gradually fade away, just another aspect of friends growing apart, taking different paths in life? And what was it like for the ghosts left behind—knowing the whole time that eventually their friend would leave them, or no longer be able to see them? Were they angry? Sad? Bitter? And did those feelings lead to violence?

Staring up as the morning light gradually filled his room, Clay knew two things: John and the others truly were his only friends in the world.

And being friends with them was the most dangerous thing he'd ever done.

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Tired as Clay was the next day in school, it didn't dampen his newfound ebullience. He found himself acting like a completely different person, a person who no longer gave a shit what people thought about him. Why should he? They weren't his friends and never would be. His real friends were outside the school, waiting for him. Or maybe even right behind him, keeping an eye on him.

That thought alone gave him extra courage. When two boys his age called him Spot, he frightened them by growling and barking like a dog and chasing them down the hall. At lunch, he passed a group of girls who asked him if he wanted some table scraps. Instead of cringing inside and heading for the furthest table, he stopped, grabbed a sandwich and cookies off one of their plates, and said, "Thanks, I do."

After school, he brought his new attitude home with him. Instead of doing his homework at the kitchen table, he took it to his room and shut his door. When Bud walked in unannounced, Clay told him to get the hell out.

"Screw you, asswipe," Bud said. "I'll do whatever the hell I want. This is my house."

"Yeah?" Clay stood up. "Better think twice. Or next time someone's giving your drunken ass a beating, I might not stop them. In fact, I might tell them where to find you."

"You little shit." Bud took a step forward, but instead of backing away, Clay moved forward as well, a pair of scissors gripped in one hand. The two stared at each other, and then something changed in Bud's eyes. Clay saw it happen, the anger draining away, replaced by something else.

Caution? Fear? Clay hoped so.

"Fuck you, Spot." Bud flipped Clay his middle finger and left, but his act of bravado didn't fool Clay.

I could get used to this. I never realized how different it was to have friends who had your back.

It never occurred to him to wonder why their parents had killed them.

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The next week passed by quickly for Clay, each day much the same as the previous one. After dinner he'd hurry to the cemetery, where John, Ricky, Brian, and Chuck would be waiting. Sometimes one of the ghosts would have a six-pack or two; Clay never asked how they got it. He figured they either bummed money or shoplifted it. Most nights they'd hang out at the Cold Spot, bullshitting the hours away.

When he told them his nickname for the cemetery, they all agreed it was a cool name.

"We should've thought of it sooner," Brian said. "The Cold Spot. The place to really chill out."

At the end of each night, Clay would head home and collapse in his bed just in time to catch three or four hours sleep. In the morning, he'd wake up with barely enough time to grab a slice of toast before hurrying to school, where his combination of attitude and exhaustion had him fending off any potential teasing or bullies with a stare or snarl. If he was lucky, he'd catch a quick nap in study hall. Then it was back home to start the cycle all over again.

One night, while sitting in the cemetery and talking about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday—what was worse, having to spend it alone in a cemetery or being stuck celebrating with a family you hated—Clay finally asked the question that had been eating at him since the first night John introduced him to the other ghosts.

"How come you guys picked this place? And why is it so damned cold?" The four spirits looked at each other, and Ricky shrugged.

"Tell him, John." John pursed his lips and then nodded. "Okay. I guess there's no reason you shouldn't know." He pointed to the ground. "This is where we were all buried."

"What?" Clay frowned. "That doesn't make sense. I've looked at these tombstones. They're so old you can't even read them anymore."

"He didn't say those were our tombstones." Brian tossed an empty beer can at a spot between two of the weather-beaten grave markers. "This is where they buried us." "I'm over there, next to that tree." Chuck pointed to a large elm whose roots had toppled over one of the granite headstones.

"I'm right here." John stomped a foot on the ground, right below where he was sitting. "They actually buried me on top of somebody else. And Ricky's only a couple of feet to my left."

There was a moment of silence following John's words. Clay tried to speak, but nothing seemed appropriate. He finally settled for a simple "I'm sorry."

"No big deal," Ricky said, although his tone indicated it definitely was. "That was a long time ago. Ancient history."

John opened a beer and took a long swallow. When he started speaking right after, Clay noticed for the first time that none of the ghosts burped when they drank. Was that because they didn't breathe? He decided to save that question for another day.

"I've got no idea why it's so cold here." John indicated the cemetery. "It's been that way as long as I can remember. Is it 'cause we got buried here without a ceremony? Or maybe there's something here, something older than we are, that helped us turn into ghosts? We'll probably never know."

"Oh." Clay sipped his beer, wishing he hadn't brought it up. Then Brian changed the subject, and Clay soon forgot about burials and cold spots.

The next time he thought about them, it was too late.

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Thanksgiving was even more horrible than Clay had anticipated. His depression came back with a vengeance. He'd been able to put his grief aside to a degree, thanks to having friends he could spend time with.

But the thought of never seeing his family again, never spending another holiday with them, hit him like a sack of bricks when he woke up Thanksgiving morning. If he hadn't been ordered to join

the family for supper, he'd have stayed locked in his room, crying into his pillow over what he'd lost.

Even the meal itself was a celebration of despair. Aunt Sally's turkey was so dry it sucked all the moisture out of Clay's mouth and scraped painfully down his throat when he swallowed. The mashed potatoes were salty enough to cause a stroke, and all three vegetables—corn, cauliflower, and peas—swam in a watery cream sauce that only differed in temperature from the skim milk Clay had in his glass. The gravy was a brown, congealed mass. Obscene islands of yellow oil and white turkey skin floated on top of it.

All of which was heaven compared to eating with the Martin family. Bud and Uncle Roy dug into their food as if they hadn't eaten in weeks, scooping seconds and thirds onto their plates before they even finished their first servings. Between belches, snorts, and chewing noises, the only sentences they spoke all began with "Pass the" or "Hand me the."

Kelly wasn't much better, shoveling food into her mouth like a man loading coal on a train, but she at least had the grace not to speak. That duty was left to Aunt Sally, who kept asking the table in general if 'everything was okay,' who 'needed more of this or that,' and 'didn't the turkey come out so much better than last year?' She seemed oblivious to the fact that no one answered her.

Clay was actually grateful he'd been seated next to Tammi, who ate nothing but three slices of buttered white bread and spent most of her time texting x-rated messages to a series of different boys. At least she wasn't spraying food from her mouth or reaching over him as if he wasn't there.

When dessert came out, Clay had to hold back a groan. Apple pie, the same thing his mother always made for the holidays. Another reminder of what he'd lost. Except her pies had never been soggy, pale abortions cowering inside undercooked dough. One bite was all it took for Clay to know he'd be on the toilet all night if he finished the pile of grossness on his plate.

"Can I be excused? I'm awfully full." He knew his uncle and Bud would remain at the table until every last bit of death-pie was

gone, and he wasn't sure he could watch that without puking. Aunt Sally quickly dashed his hopes of an easy escape.

"Not yet, dear. There's a lot of dishes to clean, and we all take turns doing it. This year, it's your turn."

"What? Why…?"

"Well, you're the only one here who hasn't done it before, right? So if you don't feel like eating no more, go ahead and get started." His uncle pointed at the kitchen with a pie-laden fork.

Figuring anything had to be better than watching the endless gluttony at the table, Clay went into the kitchen, anticipating a pile of greasy pots and dishes to wash.

Instead, he found a mountain. There was a moment when he was sure his aunt had purposely held off on doing dishes for a week just to make his life miserable. A person couldn't possibly use that many pots, pans, dishes, bowls, and utensils to cook one meal. And there were still all the plates and silverware in the dining room that hadn't come in yet.

Clay groaned, realizing the true nature of the monumental task before him. It would take two, maybe three hours to wash, dry, and put away the Everest of dishes and cookware. And John and the others were waiting for him.

I could just sneak out. Say fuck it and go.

So strong was the impulse that he found himself walking towards the back door before he was even aware his feet were moving. His hand was already reaching for the knob when a snide voice broke his trance.

"Goin' somewhere, Spot? Doesn't look like you're done yet." Clay turned and saw Bud approaching him, an evil sneer on his face and a bowl of creamed corn in his hands. Before he had a chance to move, Bud took a huge step forward and dumped the bowl right on Clay's chest.

Rivers of cold, gooey corn ran between the shirt buttons and down Clay's belly. More slid down the front of the shirt and onto his pants and sneakers. That was when something inside Clay snapped.

"You asshole! I'll kill you!" He threw himself at Bud, fists swinging, not caring that his cousin was five inches taller and twenty

pounds heavier. And promptly found himself on his back, struggling to breathe.

"You fucking little shit." Bud had his arm pulled back, ready to throw another punch. "I am so gonna kick your ass for that. And the best part is, you won't ever know when it's coming."

"What's going on in here?" Uncle Ed came into the kitchen, his eyes widening when he saw the mess on the floor.

"Clay threw food at me," Bud said, taking advantage of Clay's inability to speak. "So I threw some back. Then he slipped and fell on his ass."

"Nuh..nuh…no," Clay gasped. He pointed at Bud. "He…started…"

"I don't care who started it." Uncle Ed glared at them both. "This ain't the place for goddamned food fights. It's a waste of hard earned money. You want to throw food, buy your own and do it outside. Now clean this place up."

He opened the 'fridge, grabbed a beer, and went back out to the dining room, grumbling the entire time about 'wasteful ingrates.'

Bud wiped corn off his shirt and flicked it at Clay. "Get to work, douchebag. Looks like you got a lot of cleaning to do." He flipped Clay his middle finger and headed upstairs.

"Fuck you," Clay whispered to the empty kitchen. "Fuck all of you."

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By the time Clay finished cleaning the kitchen, it was well past nine o'clock. Uncle Ed was already asleep in his recliner and Aunt Sally had gone to bed an hour earlier, claiming 'exhaustion' from all the work she'd done. Bud and Tammi were long gone, and Kelly was locked in her room, music blaring to wake the dead she adored so much.

How pissed would she be to find out that not only were ghosts real, but even they found Tammi more attractive. That might just push her over the edge and out the window.

Thinking about death brought Clay's mind back to the incident in the kitchen. As he changed his shirt, he considered all the different options. Have John and the others beat the shit out of Bud? Arrange an 'accident?' Or maybe just sneak into his room when he was sleeping and…

And what? Kill him? It was one thing to watch while four ghosts killed a bully. It was another thing altogether to kill your own cousin. He'd be the prime suspect in that murder case for sure, unlike the death of a kid who half the school had a grudge against.

"I'll ask John. He'll know what to do."

After quickly changing his clothes, Clay hurried across the back field to the trail that led to the Cold Spot. When he got there, John and the others were already halfway through a case of Old Vienna.

"What happened, dude? We thought maybe you weren't gonna make it."

Clay took a beer and told them the details.

"Well, that's interesting," Brian said. "We saw your cousin like an hour ago, heading down to the river with some of his buddies."

"The river?" Clay couldn't imagine why his cousin would be there.

"Yeah." Ricky lit a cigarette. "There's a bunch of juniors and seniors who have this spot where they party, not far from where we dumped your friend Billy. Like a little beach. They even got some old picnic tables and a fire pit. Sometimes we sneak down after they've been partying and take any leftover beers."

"Maybe we should take a look, see what they're up to." John stood up and motioned for Clay to grab some beer.

"Don't want to get thirsty on the way."

"If we get him alone, are we gonna kick his ass?" Clay asked, walking alongside John.

"I dunno. It's your fight. Maybe we'll just hold him for you. Let you get your licks in." Clay imagined the look on Bud's face as he was held down while his own little cousin delivered a beating. Should he go for the mouth and nose? Bloody him up real good? Or maybe a good hard kick to the balls?

He was so lost in thought that he walked right into Chuck's back before he noticed the ghosts had stopped. John signaled for Clay to join him behind a wide oak tree.

"Down there. See?" John pointed to a long stretch of sand that paralleled the river. Two picnic tables sat on either side of a dying fire. An empty case of beer sat on one table, and bottles littered the area. The only two people in view were Bud and a girl Clay recognized from school, Missy something, a real burn-out. At the moment, she had her mouth plastered against Bud's and he had a hand inside her coat.

"Now what?" Clay whispered.

"We wait." John smiled, his face moon-pale in the darkness. "Sooner or later, one of them's gonna have to take a piss."

It didn't take long. Missy broke their embrace, whispered something in Bud's ear, and took off into the woods.

"Time to have some fun." John nudged Clay forward. "Go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

Clay made his way down the slope, the rough bark of the tree trunks scraping his hands as he used them to keep his balance on the slippery, frost-coated leaves. He was almost all the way to the bottom before Bud noticed him.

"Hey, who's…what the fuck? Spot? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm here to kick your ass. I'm sick of you treating me like shit, and I'm not gonna take it anymore." Clay stopped, surprised by his own words. Behind him, John clapped his hands softly. Bud's look of confusion changed to anger as he recognized John.

"Oh, you brought your pal to help you? I'll fuck you both up. And I think I'll start with you." He pointed at John. "I owe you big time."

John joined Clay, facing Bud from a distance of only ten feet. "Anytime you're ready." Fist clenched, Bud took a step forward, his lips twisted in anticipation of violence. John's expression was just the opposite, calm, almost blank. Somewhere in the woods, a girl screamed.

Bud paused and turned his head. "Missy?" His voice rose. "Missy, was that you? Are you okay?"

In the split second that Bud's attention shifted, John charged forward, catching the taller boy by surprise. His first punch connected with Bud's mouth, sending him stumbling backwards. His next was a solid blow to the stomach that knocked Bud to the ground, where he lay doubled up, his breath coming in hoarse wheezes. Blood ran from his split lips as he looked up at John.

"Pfthuck u, ath hole." John smiled and kicked him in the head. Clay gasped at the meaty, solid thunk of John's boot hitting Bud's temple. It was the kind of sound that made you think of a watermelon landing on the floor. Thick and yet sort of hollow. He stood stunned while John leaned down and grabbed Bud under the shoulders.

"Give me a hand, will you? Your cousin ain't a sack of feathers."

"What are you going to do?" Clay asked, grabbing Bud's ankles and lifting.

"I'm not going to do anything. This is your show now. All I'm doing is making sure you have the advantage this time." Clay remained silent as they carried Bud to a nearby tree and propped him against it.

"Hold him there," John said. "I'll be right back." He disappeared into the woods before Clay could ask any questions. Hands against Bud's chest, Clay hoped John returned before Bud woke up, or John and the others were going to be scraping up the bloody mess that used to be their friend. His worries barely had a chance to take root, however, before John came back with a coil of rope in his hands.

"What's that for?" Clay had a scary image of Bud hanging by his neck from the tree.

"We're gonna tie him to the tree. When he comes to, you can do whatever you want. Hit him. Piss on him. Scream at him. Or just leave him there 'til someone finds him. Whatever tickles your nuts." John showed Clay how to wrap the rope around and around, binding Bud's body and arms securely to the tree before tying a confusing knot Clay couldn't have repeated in a million years.

Clay was just stepping back to admire their handiwork when Bud let out a groan and opened his eyes.

"Wha…what…" He blinked several times and then his senses seemed to come back. "Clay, what did…you tied me to a fuckin' tree?"

He twisted his body back and forth, veins bulging in his forehead with the effort to try and free his arms, but John's bindings held tight. "You fuckin' little shit. I'm gonna kill you when I get loose. You hear me? You can't keep me here forever, you little freak. I will—"

Clay drove his fist into Bud's stomach as hard as he could. "I'm not a freak!"

"Fuh…fuhking fuh…freak," Bud gasped.

A dark red blanket of rage descended over Clay's thoughts. All the taunts, all the insults, all the fists he'd endured over the years, all of it combined to overload his brain, leaving only an anger that burned brighter than an atomic explosion.

"I'M NOT A FREAK! STOP CALLING ME THAT!"

The next few minutes were a blur. Clay couldn't see, couldn't think. There was pain in his hands, but it was distant, dull. He heard nothing but his own voice shouting "Who's a bad dog now, huh? Who's a bad dog now?"

A sharper, more immediate pain erupted in his hand and the rage disappeared, the red and black clouds dissipating like thunderheads after a storm. As the darkness faded, his vision returned and he found himself staring at his own hands. They looked like he was wearing red gloves.

Before he could process what that meant, something else caught his eye. One of the fingers on his left hand was sticking out at a forty-five degree angle from its fellow digits. That's when the pain became real.

"Aaaah!" The scream tore from his throat. Without thinking, he grabbed his injured hand with his good one. There was a sound like wet wood popping in a campfire and his injured finger shifted sideways, the movement accompanied by an agony so intense it was like a cherry bomb detonating inside his hand. Then it was gone as fast as it had come, the burning-hot pain replaced by a duller, belly-turning ache.

He opened his hands and saw all his fingers were pointing in the correct direction again.

"Dude, that must've hurt." John's voice. The ghost put a sympathetic arm around Clay's shoulders, which sent tiny sparks of hurt through his injured finger and caused him to groan.

"I dislocated my thumb once. Fucker hurt for two weeks. You'll be fine, though. It'll swell like a bastard, but keep it taped up and you'll be good to. Now, tell me, was it worth it?"

"Was what worth it?" Clay looked at John, who was pointing straight ahead of them. He let his gaze follow the line of John's finger, right to… His first thought was they'd found a dead deer on the road and tied it to a tree. That didn't make sense, though, 'cause why would anyone put clothes on a deer? Then he remembered. *Bud.*

His cousin's head hung down. Blood covered Bud's clothes, big, red splotches of it on his shirt and pants, even on his shoes. More of it matted his hair into thick clumps.

"Jesus, did I do that?" Clay looked down at his hands, gloved in his cousin's blood.

I couldn't have. Not me. John must've…

"Shit, you sure as hell did. I never seen anyone go to town like you did." John went to Bud and lifted his head. Clay gasped. Bud's nose was a flattened, crooked piece of flesh dripping gobs of red and green slime. His lips were split in so many places they looked like he'd chewed barbed wire. At least four of his teeth were missing. Both of his eyes were swollen shut. Greenish-brown bruises had already started to appear beneath the blood that coated his face and dripped from one ear. He looked…dead.

Is he? Did I kill him? The thought of it no longer engendered the same feelings in Clay. Now the idea of killing someone—killing his own cousin!—with his bare hands suddenly seemed worse than any teasing, any heartache, he'd ever endured.

John let go of Bud's head and it dropped down. When his chin hit his chest, a low groan, barely audible, escaped from between his grotesquely deformed lips.

"He's alive!" John nodded. "And now it's up to you to choose how he dies."

"What?" Clay stopped in the act of moving towards his cousin. He wasn't sure what he'd been going to do—apologize? Hug

him? Set him free?—but John's words halted him in his tracks. "No. Why would I do that?"

With a shrug, John motioned at Bud. "Because he's already dying, thanks to you. Concussion, maybe a bone into the brain, maybe organ damage. Hard to say. But he's definitely on the way out. Take it from someone who's been there, who's seen it more times than I want to remember. Now it's just a matter of choosing how he goes."

Clay shook his head, unable to find any words.

"Listen." John poked Bud in the chest. This time there was no response. "You can take him to the hospital, where not only will he suffer for hours before he kicks, but you'll get arrested for killing him. Or, you can leave him here, and he'll slowly freeze to death, or maybe his heart will just give out. Either way, you're talking a long, painful demise. Then there's the third way."

"The third way? What's that?" Clay didn't want to think of his cousin dying at all, let alone in the manner John suggested.

"Fast and quick. Put him out of his misery, just like you'd do to a dog that got hit by a car. Let him go with some dignity." John reached behind the tree and picked something up. Turning, he held the object out to Clay. It was a knife. No, it was more than a knife. It was a fucking sword of a knife, a giant, shiny blade that would have seemed large in Rambo's hands.

Clay took it, his hands shaking as he accepted the heavy weight.

"I…I can't."

"Clay-man. I won't lie. It'll be hard. But don't think of it as murder. Think of it as…release. You're releasing him from the pain. And, at the same time, you're releasing your own pain, the pain he caused you every day. Calling you Spot. Telling you to go fetch. Humiliating you in front of your friends and family." John pressed his hands over Clay's, squeezing them around the rubberized grip. "One second, and then you'll be free forever."

Echoes of past torment rebounded inside Clay's head. The names. The fights. The food thrown at him in the cafeterias.

Just like Bud did to you tonight.

It was the memory of Bud's earlier aggression, the sticky corn sliding down his shirt in cold, gummy rivers, that did it for Clay. He didn't know if it was his voice or John's reminding him of it, and he didn't care. He took the knife and ran at Bud, holding the blade in front of him like a crazed soldier charging the enemy one last time.

Cold steel slid into Bud's flesh as easy as cutting air. The force of Clay's attack sent the knife all the way through and into the tree trunk, jarring Clay's shoulders. He tried to pull it out but it wouldn't move. Bud gave a long, shuddering gasp, bloody spittle dripping over his lips, and then fell silent. Clay waited for him to breathe again, for his chest to rise and fall, but the body remained still. It was over.

Clay stared at the corpse, his heart pounding, his breath heavy and deep as if he'd just completed a race.

I did it. I stood up for myself, showed him, showed them all, that I'm not gonna take any shit anymore, from anyone. And if someone in school fucks with me, they'll end up the same way.

He turned around, intending to ask John what they were going to do with the body. Except John was no longer behind him. Glancing around, Clay saw him heading towards the trees, where Brian, Ricky, and Chuck were coming out of the woods, holding another person by the arms. A person staring at Clay with wide, horrified eyes.

Oh, shit. Missy. I forgot about her. She saw everything.

"John? You can't let her tell. I'll go to jail." Clay pointed at Missy. At that moment, he didn't care what they did to her, as long as he didn't get in trouble. The thought of killing her didn't bother him—it wasn't like he knew her, cared about her. She was probably as big an asshole as Bud; she'd have to be to spend her nights fucking him. So no great loss.

"Don't you worry, Clay-man. She won't be talking to anyone. Ever." Ricky laughed, and the others joined in.

Missy screamed and pulled one arm free. She was still trying to get her other arm loose when Brian punched her in the face. Her screaming stopped and her legs gave out; she would have fallen to the ground if Ricky didn't maintain his grip.

"Strip her," John said, and the other boys immediately started tearing her clothes off—jacket, shirt, pants, underwear—until she stood naked and crying.

"Guys, what are you doing?" The moment he asked, Clay already knew it was a stupid question. John was taking his clothes off as well.

"What's it look like? Time for some fun." "But I thought…you said…you can't…"

"We lied." John's voice was as cold and cruel as the night air. "Truth is, we can bang just like always. We just like it when they're scared."

He motioned with his hand and Ricky forced Missy onto her back.

"What about Bud?" The idea that John had lied, that he was about to rape and kill a girl, didn't make sense, and rather than deal with the confusion Clay's mind reverted back to the main problem. "We can't leave him there."

"Do whatever the fuck you want." John spread Missy's legs and climbed on top of her. "Leave him. Bury him. Toss him in the river. He's your problem now."

The others cheered and clapped as John started moving up and down on the struggling girl. Clay looked away, embarrassment and guilt and a growing sense of betrayal warring with the fear inside him.

"Hey, Spot!" The words stabbed at him like a dagger, but Clay instinctively turned back. Ricky was staring right at him. "C'mon over and join us. You can hump her leg!"

More laughter, and this time it was all too familiar to Clay. There was no happiness in it, just ridicule, the same kind of laughter he'd heard all his life on playgrounds and in classrooms. The rage rose up inside him, only this time it wasn't a blinding, hot anger. It was ice cold, frigid as the river behind them, bitter as poison. Clay went to Bud and pulled the knife free, yanking so hard that something tore inside his shoulder. He paid no mind to the pain.

Walking calmly and surely, he crossed the small clearing and approached the ghosts, making no effort to hide his intentions. For their

part, Chuck, Ricky, and Brian simply watched him, their smiles never leaving their faces.

Even when he plunged the blade into John's back, over and over again, the other ghosts just stood there. John's reaction was not calm by any means. He cried out with each blow, his body twisting and arching. His hands beat at the hard ground. His legs kicked. Clay kept stabbing him, again and again, until finally John stopped moving. Pulling the knife from the body, Clay looked at the others.

"If any of you try to follow me, I'll do the same thing to you. I'm not afraid." Chuck held up his hands in surrender. Brian nodded. Ricky took out a cigarette and lit it. "Whatever, man. Do what you have to."

Clay turned and ran up the hill, sprinting as fast as he could, unmindful of the branches slapping his face and snagging his jacket. It was only when the path turned from dirt into gravel that he realized the dark and his own haste had sent him the wrong way. Instead of coming out in his uncle's field, he'd ended up behind the town park. From there it was only a five-minute walk to the police station.

He made it in two.

Bursting into a police station well after midnight, with a bloody knife in his hand, was not the smartest move. In fact, it almost got him shot. But the weapon, combined with his disheveled appearance and extreme desperation, convinced the desk officer to send a patrol unit with Clay to check out his story of stumbling across a murder scene and killing the boy who'd killed Bud. So it was that less than an hour after leaving Bud's body, Clay was leading the two officers back to it. Stepping into the clearing, Clay froze in disbelief.

John, Chuck, Ricky, and Brian were gone. The bodies of Bud and Missy were still there, though, Bud's corpse slumped within its bonds and Missy's naked and bloody on the ground.

"Jesus fucking Christ." One of the officers pulled out his radio, started shouting for backup and an ambulance. The other ran to Bud and checked him for a pulse. Clay ignored them. He was staring at Missy. The knife wounds stood out clear against her pale skin.

"How…she was alive when I left," he whispered. It didn't make sense. Then suddenly it did. He'd been stabbing John. Except

John was a ghost, wasn't he. And ghosts weren't alive. He remembered how none of the ghosts left footprints when they walked. Was it so hard to believe a knife would go right through one? And into the living person underneath?

"Oh, no. I killed her, too."

The officer had left Bud and gone to Missy, was shaking his head at the other cop, who was still on the radio. At the same time, they both turned and looked at Clay. Who realized his only alibi was gone.

Clay spun and ran into the woods, panic overriding any rational thought. He let his legs carry him wherever they wanted to go, his mind filled with nothing but white noise and a desperate desire to not get arrested. He ran through the darkness until his muscles gave out and he collapsed. Rocks and frozen dirt scraped his face and hands, and the force of hitting the ground sent new pains through the shoulder he'd hurt.

Then it all disappeared into blackness.

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It was still dark when Clay woke up. Dark, and much colder than before. He checked his watch and saw he'd only been out for a half hour or so. Rolling over, he noticed a house not far away and wondered if he was dreaming. He blinked several times, but the house remained. Groaning from the aches and pains that covered every inch of him, he got to his feet and said a heartfelt thank you to his legs for bringing him to the one place he needed to be.

Home.

I can sneak in, leave a note saying I didn't do it, and then pack some clothes and find a place to hide until I can figure out how to solve this mess.

Of course, that wouldn't be easy. Not at all. The only way to possibly save himself was to prove the ghosts existed, and that they'd made him kill Bud and Missy.

Clay paused at the bottom of the driveway. Where would he hide? In the woods? In town? No matter where he went, John and the others would find him.

I'll have to run away. Go somewhere. Then I can contact one of those TV shows, the ones who go on ghost hunts. They have all the right equipment to spot ghosts. Once I prove they exist, I'll be famous. And famous people don't go to jail.

Feeling a little better about his chances, Clay hurried across the yard. He unlocked the front door, careful to close it slowly and quietly behind him. Although he'd only been living there a few weeks, he was familiar enough with the house to make his way down the hall in the dark. He had just put his foot on the first step when the kitchen lights came on behind him.

"Hello, Clay-man."

Even without the nickname, Clay would have recognized John's voice. Cold dread ran through him as he turned and squinted into the glare.

"We've been waiting for you." Instead of frightening Clay, John's words felt like a godsend. They were all right there, in the house. At night, when anyone could see them.

"Uncle Roy! Aunt Sally! Help! There's someone in the kitchen!" A moment of silence followed Clay's shout.

"Try again, dude," someone said from farther in the kitchen. It sounded like Ricky.

"Help! Tammi! Kelly! Anyone?"

John stepped forward. His shirt was covered in blood, which Clay knew couldn't be his own. "You tried to kill me, Clay-man."

"You lied to me." Clay backed up, placing his feet on the second step.

"Yeah, we did." More figures moved within the kitchen. Ricky, Chuck, and Brian. John continued talking.

"We lied about a lot. We do that. We're fuckin' ghosts, man. We don't play by your rules."

"Why?" Clay felt a strange need to know the reason behind the betrayal.

"Why?" John looked at Ricky and then back at Clay. "Because we needed you. Only you could give us what we wanted."

"What was that?"

"Me." Another figure stepped forward. A terrible chill ran through Clay.

"Bud?" His clothes were no longer torn and bloody. His face had healed as well, looking pale but whole. He looked exactly the way he had when he'd left the house after supper.

"Hello, Spot. Glad to see me?"

"No. It can't be. I…" Clay's mouth failed him. His stomach churned, and he thought he might puke.

"You killed me? Yep, you sure did, you little fuck. And don't think I'm not gonna kick your ass for that. But it turns out you did me a favor. See, now I can hang out forever, never worry about getting old, or working a shit job, or getting stuck with some snot-nosed rug rats."

All wrong. This is all wrong!

Clay shook his head. "How…?"

"One thing we didn't lie about." John put his hand on Bud's shoulder. "One of the few ways to become a ghost is to get killed by a family member. You know how hard it is to convince someone to kill someone in their family? And before they do, you have to be sure the person they kill is someone you want hanging with you for eternity. We've tried before, but no one came through for us. Now, for Bud, we had our sights set on the fat one—"

"Kelly," Bud said.

"—But she never leaves her fuckin' room. And the other one's too busy sucking dick every night. And then Pow!" John slapped his hands together, "You came along. A total head case. Dead parents, all the kids make fun of you. It was like God said, 'here, take him. I don't want him.'"

"No. NO!" Clay turned and ran up the stairs. It couldn't be. Couldn't be! The people he'd thought his friends had just used him to turn Bud into a ghost? They wanted Bud over him? Not fair. Not fair!

At the top of the stairs, he headed for his uncle's room. How he hadn't woken up with all the noise was amazing, but he'd wake him up now, tell him –

Clay's feet slid out from underneath him and he landed hard on his back. Cold wetness seeped through his pants and covered his hands as he tried to push himself up. More lights came on; the hallway,

the bedrooms. Every light in the house, blazing. He was lying in a pool of blood, the metallic stink of it poisoning the air. Raising his head, Clay saw the bodies of Uncle Ed and Aunt Sally in their bed, dozens of kitchen knives sticking out of them, turning them into human porcupines.

"Don't worry, Spot, I didn't do it." Bud stood in the doorway, snickering. "Last thing we need is those two assholes living forever, right?"

"And he didn't do his sisters, either," John said. "One of our club rules. No bitches allowed."

"Yeah. Who the hell wants to spend the next couple of hundred years with some yapping gash?" Ricky entered the room, his clothes just as bloody as John's. "When we feel like getting laid, we find ourselves a nice target, like Missy. Thanks for solving that problem for us, too, by the way."

"He can't be a ghost." Clay sat up and pointed at Bud. Everything was suddenly clear in his mind. It was a test. Or a dream. But it couldn't be real. "His body was still tied to the tree when I brought the police back. You were all buried in the old cemetery. The Cold Spot. That's part of coming back. You said so."

John shook his head. "You really are stupid. We lied, remember? Where you get buried doesn't matter. Only the killing."

"But…the Cold Spot…it's not natural."

"You could be right about that. See, the reason our parents buried us in that cemetery was because they found out what we did there at night."

"What you…?"

"Devil worship, they called it." John licked some blood off his fingers. "We didn't take it real serious. Sacrificed a few animals, read some spells from books we stole from the library. It was cool, you know? Different. But our parents…they were real strict when it came to religion. Told us to stop. And when we didn't…" John drew his finger across his neck like a knife.

The last of Clay's mental defenses gave way, defeated. Nothing was as he'd thought; all of it was lies. He hung his head.

"So now you're gonna kill me, too?"

"We were gonna, but Bud here had a better idea."

Tears ran down Clay's cheeks and he didn't look up as the boys moved closer.

"I don't care. Whatever."

And it was true. Nothing mattered anymore. Coldness took root inside him and expanded, eating away the last of his hopes and dreams. He'd always be the freak, always be the one with no friends. Better dead than a life like that. And he knew they were going to kill him, no matter what they said. After all, they lied.

Something hard struck him in the back of the head, and everything went dark.

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"Hey, Clay, wanna do a puzzle with me?"

Clay glanced away from the TV, where a funny baby with a football-shaped head was pointing a ray gun at his mother. The baby's name was…

Clay couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He was a bad baby. Mothers were nice. Clay remembered his own mother, sort of. Nice. And there was a dog…

"Clay. Please help me with the puzzle." It was Kevin. He was two years older than Clay but he still liked baby games. Sometimes Clay did, too. They were easy, and he didn't have to think.

"Sure, I'll help." Clay moved his chair over to the table where Kevin was moving puzzle pieces around. Kevin was one of his many friends at the hospital. Kevin, Sam, Dotty, Billy…after his arrest, he'd never expected to make friends. But here at the hospital, no one cared what he looked like. Or what he'd done. They just liked to talk, and play. The drugs helped with that. They made everyone happy and kind of sleepy. But that was okay, too. There were worse things than happy and sleepy. Sometimes at night…sometimes he remembered those things. Then the orderlies would have to give him extra pills to stop the screaming.

"It's almost Christmas," Kevin said. He'd been saying it all week. Kevin was a big Christmas fan. He had the day circled on his calendar. "Only five days. Five days 'til Christmas."

Clay knew Kevin was looking forward to Christmas because it meant his family would bring him toys. But for Clay, it meant something else. It would be one month since they put him in the hospital. He'd been so scared. And now he wasn't. Because now he had friends. Real friends, not fake ones. And no one ever teased him.

"Here." He handed Kevin a cardboard shape with a piece of a tiger's nose on it. "Put this one there." He tapped an empty place on the board.

"Thanks." Kevin smiled, and Clay smiled back.

Happy and sleepy and safe.

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"Hey, Spot. Wake up."

Strong hands shook Clay's shoulder. He opened his eyes. He tried to scream, but another hand covered his mouth. John, Bud, Ricky, Chuck, and Brian stood around his bed. In the dim glow of the nightlight in the ceiling, they finally looked more like ghosts than living people.

"Took us a long time to find you, Spotty," Bud said. He leaned forward and gave Clay's nipple a vicious twist. Clay cried out again, but Chuck's wide palm muffled the sound. "But now we know where you are, we can visit anytime we want."

Ricky pulled the sheets down and grabbed Clay's underwear, yanked it up hard in a reverse wedgie that tore the elastic and squeezed his balls painfully together.

"And we'll be watching you, even when you can't see us." John waved and then walked through the wall. The others followed. Bud was the last to leave.

"See ya tomorrow, Spot."

Clay's screams didn't stop until the orderlies stuck him with a needle. Even then, as they tied the white coat around him and sleep reached out for him, he knew the screams would come back.

Just like the ghosts.

HE WAITS

I woke up one morning and had the oddest rhyme repeating in my head: "Little Timmy lives deep inside the well. Don't get close or Timmy will drag you down to hell." I had no recollection of ever hearing it before, but I figured I must have. When I went down to my office that morning, I added it to my idea notebook, as I do with all such odd thoughts. Usually I promptly forget them after that – which is why I'm up to 3 notebooks now – but this one stuck with me. So, after a few weeks, I did a search for it online. And found nothing. That's when it struck me that my subconscious had come up with it all on its own. I decided I needed to do a story about a monster in a well, and I'd use the rhyme as an old children's tale to form the basis of the story – like the little girl who does the sing-song rhyme in Nightmare on Elm Street.

What evolved from that one line became what I consider one of my most frightening novellas. It originally came out in limited edition hardback from Dark Fuse/Delirium (you can still find rare copies online), and now it's available on Amazon and in my web store as an ebook.

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."

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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.

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"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.

THIEF OF SOULS

Sometimes writers get ideas in the strangest of ways. Several years ago I happened to discover that the word 'taboo' has its roots in the Polynesian word 'tapu,' which refers to a "spiritual restriction' or "implied prohibition." The Polynesians had many things that were tapu, ranging from social don'ts to religious rules, all of them decided on by the gods. And that got me thinking about Polynesian masks, the scary faces you see everywhere now on tiki mugs, Hawaiian shirts, and other party paraphernalia. What if those gods existed, and really did inhabit the ancient carvings? And what if someone stole one of them? After that, it was just a matter of coming up with a plot around that idea.

Perry Spellman stared at the wooden idol hanging on the wall and shivered as a cold hand tickled his spine.

That is the ugliest piece of shit I've ever seen.

For a moment, he considered leaving it right where it was. After all, he had more than enough merchandise packed into his two duffle bags. Then he paused.

Anything that ugly had to be worth something. Why else would someone hang it in plain sight?

So instead of following his instincts, he moved closer to take a better look.

In the flashlight's narrow circle of illumination, the grimacing face looked ready to bite his fingers off. He played the light up and down and noticed the idol was larger than he'd first thought, perhaps three feet tall. Carved from some type of dark wood—mahogany, perhaps, or something even more exotic—it glowered as if pissed at the whole world. Kind of the way Perry had felt since finding out his supposed best friend had decided to scam him out of almost forty grand.

He reached out to touch the shining wood and the evil mouth seemed to twitch. He pulled his hand back and then chastised himself for being such a wimp. Some thief he was, getting spooked by his own flashlight's motion.

Just bag it and keep going. Don't let the shadows get to you.

Although he'd never broken into a house before, he had a good idea of what to do and what not to do. A big no-no was nerves. You had to control your natural fear of getting caught or you'd screw things up somehow. And the way to combat nerves was to be prepared.

He'd done his homework on the house. Family on vacation, no dogs, no house sitters. No one stopping by during the day or night to water the plants. An alarm system just like the ones he'd been installing for the past ten years. Of course, it wasn't one of *his* customers. He might be desperate—thanks to Endy, that motherfucking asshole—but

he wasn't foolish. Or stupid. In fact, he'd made sure to choose his target from Endy's client list, which he'd gotten by hacking into the double-crossing bastard's computer at work.

The plan was simple. Three houses in two weeks. He figured that would be all it took to get enough stuff to pawn so he could replace the money in the bank account. Then he'd just have to conveniently misplace a single bank statement and Linda would never know he'd almost lost their entire life's savings.

After that, he'd find Endy, no matter how long it took, and…

The thought died there, as it always did. The temptation was to say he'd kill Endy Almogardo, but Perry didn't think he really had it in himself to do that.

Of course, he'd never thought himself capable of burglary, either.

Amazing what you can do when everything you hold dear is at stake.

Perry gave himself a mental nudge. *Stay focused. Distractions are another no-no.*

He opened one of the duffel bags and lifted the idol off its brackets. The wood was warm to the touch even though the house was almost chillingly cool. As he transferred the idol to his duffel, there was a moment when his blood pounded in his temples so hard he actually heard it—thud-thud-thud—like a rhythmic drumming.

Jesus, keep it the fuck together.

Perry dropped the idol into the bag and took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. The pounding subsided, and he zipped the bag closed and placed it by the door, next to its twin. Then he headed upstairs to check the bedrooms.

It would be two days before he thought about the idol again.

"I'll give you twelve grand for the whole lot of it."

Carlo Johnson, the overweight, perpetually-sweating proprietor of Carlo's Pawn & Jewelry, waved his hand at the table. "Everything except that," he added, pointing a sausage finger at the wooden idol.

Perry bit his lip. He'd hoped for a few thousand more. "Why? It's gotta be worth something, right?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Carlo said, pulling on the fat cigar that always seemed to be in his mouth. "Prob'ly a couple thou. But I can't touch it. Thing's one of a kind, a museum piece. I remember seein' something about it in the newspapers a while back."

Damn. Perry fought the urge to slam his hand on the table. He'd tried to be so careful. He'd only taken things he figured a fence could move quickly and easily. TVs. Laptops. Stereos. Jewelry and watches, as long as they weren't engraved. Cameras. Coins and stamps.

Christ. Who keeps a one-of-a-kind piece of art in their downstairs hallway?

Now he was stuck with the damn thing. No way he could tell Linda he'd bought it. He'd never been into art, and besides, the thing was so damn hideous she'd tell him to take it back, and then what? How could he explain he had no receipt because he'd stolen it?

Maybe I should just hang on to it. Use it to frame Endy for the break in.

That idea made him feel a little better.

"Okay," he told Carlo. "I'll take the twelve K. Can you handle more in a few days?"

Carlo laughed, a dark, nasty sound that didn't match his easy going, jolly demeanor. He and Perry went back many years, all the way to high school, when they used to get stoned together behind the building before shop class. It was Carlo he'd gone to for Linda's engagement ring, and again for several anniversary presents. Carlo was as dishonest as they came but Perry was pretty certain the man wouldn't rat out his old party buddy.

"For you, I can handle whatever you bring me. Just be careful. We both know this ain't your thing, if you get what I'm saying."

Perry nodded. Neither was having your best friend tell you he could double your money in one week, and then disappear.

He didn't say anything out loud, though. Endy had been in shop class with both of them, and who knew if he and Carlo were still friends—or business acquaintances. You couldn't be too careful.

Another one of his new rules.

Empty houses have a different feel to them. This was the first thing Perry had noticed earlier in the week when he came home from work on the first day after Linda had gone upstate to help get her sister's house ready for their father coming home from the hospital. It was the first time he and Linda had slept in separate places since they'd gotten married, and the house had a distinctly cold, barren feel to it without her presence.

People who live together generally develop habits and patterns to make life easier. Each person knows where things belong, what time everyone leaves for work or gets home, which foods in the refrigerator not to touch.

When Perry arrived home from depositing his money, he automatically checked the message light at the base of the house phone. It wasn't that he expected it to be blinking—she was more apt to call him on his cell phone—but part of his routine was to always look, just in case.

The red light was flashing.

Linda's message was typically short and sweet. It had always amazed Perry how a woman who was so effusive in person or on the phone could be so abrupt when leaving a message.

"Hey, honey, I tried you on your cell but you didn't answer. Did you forget it again? Anyhow, they delayed Dad's release by a couple of days so I might be here a little longer than I thought. I'll try you again later. Love you!"

Perry ran his hands across his pants pockets. No cell phone. Then he remembered. He'd plugged it in to recharge it the previous night.

And that's probably where it still was.

He made a mental note to keep it with him at all times. He had a habit of leaving it at home—or at the office—at least once a week. Normally that wasn't a big deal. Linda would get on his case about it, asking what would he do if his car broke down and he couldn't call for help, and for a couple of days he'd remember to grab it on his way out the door. Then eventually he'd forget again. But with Linda out of town, he really should have it with him at all times.

After calling her back and apologizing, he brought the stolen idol upstairs to the small room they'd converted into a combination computer room and reading room. Something Carlo had said about seeing the idol in a newspaper had him curious. Exactly how valuable was it?

He stared at it again while waiting for the computer to boot up, oddly drawn to it despite his revulsion for it.

"Whoever carved you had talent, that's for sure," he said to the wicked face. "And quite an imagination."

It was hard not to stare at it. The narrow eyes slanted downwards towards the center of the face, like Asian features done in caricature. The hawkish nose perched over full, thick lips that were pulled back from a mouth filled with jagged, crooked teeth. A long, exaggerated lower jaw dropped down to a pointed chin with a sharp split that might have represented a cleft, or possibly a mandrake-style beard. Two tusk-like teeth protruded up from the jaw, almost touching the upper teeth.

Paint some red on the eyes and it'd make a perfect devil-face prop for a horror movie.

Tearing his gaze away from the thing, Perry opened a search page and paused. What was he supposed to type in as a search term? Devil statue? Ugly idol? Then inspiration hit. He knew the name of the homeowner he'd stolen it from. And Carlo had said it was a museum piece, right?

He typed "Jenson Kellogg+museum."

Sure enough, the very first listing was for an article in the local paper, an interview with Jenson Kellogg about the artifact. Turned out it wasn't an idol at all, but some sort of Polynesian religious mask portraying an *Akua*, or god, of death.

"To the Polynesians, they were gods. In Western society we would call them demons. The tribesmen used to hang them on their huts as protection against evil. The demon was charged with guarding the hut and all who lived inside, and was supposed to eat the soul—and sometimes the body, too—of whoever brought harm to the owner."

Perry looked over at the mask. "So you're like some kind of stone age watch dog. Good boy." He patted the mask on the head, and then drew his hand back quickly when he got a static shock.

The article went on to say that after spending six months on a remote South Seas island studying the culture, the local shaman—the last in his line, apparently—had honored Kellogg by presenting him with a mask carved more than two hundred years ago.

"According to the shaman," Kellogg was quoted as saying, "his great-grandfather, a powerful magician, carved it."

Kellogg had considered donating it to a museum, but in the end he felt obligated to keep it in his house. "It was a gift, and where I come from you don't give those away."

Perry leaned back and considered the idol again. *Demon mask,* he corrected himself. "Great. Guess I'm stuck with you, at least for a while."

So where could he store a three-foot relic where Linda wouldn't find it?

The spare closet. Linda had been after him for years to clean out the extra closet, which over time had slowly morphed into a storage area for all of Perry's junk. Old clothes, a bag of softball equipment from when he'd played first base for the company team, boxes of stuff dating all the way back to college. Nowadays Linda refused to even open the door.

"I'm afraid something will bite me," she liked to say. "Or I'll get buried in an avalanche."

I could probably leave it in there until the day I die and she'd never know. Just in case, though, he made sure to hide it behind a garbage bag of old suits and jackets he hadn't worn since getting married eight years before.

When he was done, he checked his watch. Just enough time to eat something and then hit the next house on his list.

As soon as he opened the door from his garage to the house, Perry knew something was wrong, even though he couldn't see a thing. The house was dark as a cave.

And that was the problem.

I know I left the kitchen lights on. He did it habitually, to discourage burglars. And on the off chance he'd somehow forgotten, the small night lights Linda kept in the hall and living room—so if you had to get up at night for a glass of water or to pee—should have been on.

"Who's there? Linda?" Even as he called her name, he cursed his own stupidity. It couldn't be her. She hated the dark. Besides, she was currently several hours upstate.

Which meant either there'd been a power failure or someone else was in the house.

A quick glance outside showed lights on in several of his neighbor's homes. That left only one possibility, and thanks to his big mouth he'd alerted the thieves to his presence.

As if summoned by his thoughts, something thumped upstairs. Perry's heart responded by smashing against his ribs like an animal trying to break free from a cage.

There's an intruder and they most likely know I'm here. Between setting his car alarm and calling out for Linda, he'd basically announced himself just like every idiot in every scary movie did, right before the psycho killer took them out with an axe or chainsaw. He might as well have shined a spotlight on himself and shouted "Come and get me!"

More sounds came from above, a *thump-slide-bump* that his imagination rendered as a corpse dragging itself down the upstairs hall. Resisting the urge to call out for help, Perry instead dropped the bags he'd been carrying and retreated back the way he'd come, stepping as silently as he could, his hands outstretched. Lifting each leg in exaggerated slow motion, like a cartoon character, he stepped into the garage, his pulse pounding in his head so loudly he wasn't sure he'd be able to hear someone sneaking up on him.

Once inside the garage, two battery-powered stick-on lights provided just enough illumination for him to locate the shoebox marked "fishing lures." Inside it lay a six-shot revolver and a box of shells.

The moment Perry placed his hands on the cool, slightly oily metal a surge of adrenaline rushed through his veins, filling him with an almost primitive belief in himself, a confidence in his ability to defeat whoever waited upstairs.

"Gonna get you now, motherfuckers," he whispered, while he slid rounds into the cylinder and clicked it closed.

He went back into the house, his passage through the family room the complete opposite of his previous trip. No effort to be silent this time. No sneaking around. No hiding.

He had a gun.

And it didn't matter that he'd never shot anything except targets at the range. Like the first caveman to sharpen a spear or the first warrior to fire an arrow, he felt an atavistic sense of power, of dominance over any enemy that might be waiting for him.

Perry placed his foot on the first stair, never realizing his lips had pulled back in a toothy snarl that any of his ancestors many times over would have instantly recognized.

The look of a hunter.

Unfortunately, his new-found confidence didn't last long.

The upstairs hallway was even darker than the downstairs, causing Perry to pause for a moment so his eyes could adjust. Although moments earlier he'd have bet his life an intruder waited for him in one of the rooms, somewhere in the middle of climbing the stairs he'd lowered the gun to his side.

What if he was wrong?

What if Linda had come home early and hadn't heard him? Distracted over her father's illness, she might have switched the lights off and gone upstairs, might even be in the bathroom or bedroom right now, getting ready for bed.

The image of her coming into the hallway and him putting a bullet into her chest, splattering her guts all over the walls, had set his hand shaking so badly he'd been afraid of pulling the trigger before identifying what he was shooting at.

One wrong shot, one stupid case of misidentification, that's all it would take to lose his wife, get arrested for murder, and then be found in possession of stolen goods on top of it all.

That's when his hand had dropped to his side.

But he hadn't put the gun away. Not when there was just as much a chance that whoever was upstairs was armed and dangerous and ready to shoot without hesitation.

Perry stopped at the top of the stairs, his free hand flat against the wall to orient himself. From where he stood, the kitchen was directly in front of him, the living room and dining room to the left, and to the right were a master bedroom, guest bedroom, second bath and a smaller guest room he'd turned into a sort of office.

He held his breath, waiting for any sounds. Something that would let him know where the intruders were so he wouldn't be blindly walking around and making a target of himself. His only advantage was he knew the layout of the house better than any intruder could, a detail he hoped would make up for the fact that an intruder would have a flashlight.

His lungs were beginning to crave air when he heard it again. A definite *thump-bump.* He turned to his left. It sounded like it had come from the end of the hall.

The office.

Perry hesitated another moment. It had to be an intruder. No way Linda would be rummaging in the office in the dark. He took two deep breaths. This was it. No turning back. Time to defend his house.

Keeping as far from the center of the hall as he could, so as to minimize any squeaking of floorboards, Perry crept down the hall with his gun extended forward and his back near but not against the wall. The last thing he needed was to accidentally knock over a picture or mirror. A window at the end of the hall let in just enough light so that he could discern the shapes of the door frames in the black and gray landscape of the hallway.

He paused again at the office door when he noticed it was shut. He distinctly remembered it being open earlier; seeing it shut alarmed him because he always left all the doors in the house open. He hated seeing the doors to rooms closed as much as he hated seeing closet or pantry doors left open.

So who closed it?

The intruder, you idiot, his mind supplied.

Perry's hand began to shake again. Should he fling the door open and burst in with gun raised? Open the door and then duck to the side like they did on TV? Crouch down low and hope the intruder aimed high?

Just then a red glow lit up the hallway. Perry looked down and saw it was coming from beneath the office door. As soon as he did, a single thought raced through his mind:

Fire!

Suddenly there was no time to hesitate. He couldn't let his house burn down. Forgetting caution, he grabbed the knob and pushed the door open. While it was still moving, he jumped into the room and dodged to his right.

Something hard smashed into his shoulder and head, knocking the gun from his arm and sending him to his knees. The room was awash in red, so bright he couldn't see anything. The dazzling light turned the room into a Martian landscape and he had to close his eyes against the vivid glare.

And then it was gone.

The sudden disappearance of the red brilliance left him just as blind as its appearance. Colored whorls spiraled across his eyes in the pitch black as he scrabbled his hands across the floor, desperate to find his gun. He felt absolutely certain someone was in the room with him. Someone who meant to do him hard. Meant to kill him, to gut him like pig, to carve out his organs and gorge on them while his life blood ran in rivers across the floor…

Jesus Christ, where the fuck is the gun?

He was slapping his hands against the wood now, no longer sliding them back and forth, his mind filled with images of his mutilated body serving as food for flies and maggots until Linda returned…

Goddammit, where is it?

The sense of impending death grew stronger, an almost physical presence creeping up on him, stalking him. A musky odor filled his nostrils and he felt the hot breath of a wild beast against the back of his neck.

"No!"

Perry whirled around, flailing his fists in all directions at the unseen enemy taunting him from within the dark. They struck nothing but air, which only increased his desperate attempts to fend off the thing waiting to tear his throat open. Each swing grew wilder until his balance deserted him and he toppled over, striking his elbows on the floor. Electric lines of pain shot up his arms and he cried out. Death drew closer, its presence an oppressive weight pressing down on him, squeezing him until his blood thundered in his eardrums with a sound not unlike the pounding of drums. His muscles froze and he lay helpless on his stomach, waiting for the claws of the beast to pierce his flesh.

And then the world disappeared in an explosion of white light.

The burst of light broke the paralysis fear had brought to Perry's limbs. He let out a scream and covered his head with his arms. His body twisted to one side and his legs curled up against his chest. Even squeezed shut, his eyes leaked tears as they rebelled against the sudden radiance.

Did I die?

Even as the thought appeared, he knew he hadn't. He could feel the wood beneath his body, smell the stink of his own fear-sweat. There was another smell, too.

Moth balls.

His heart still beating a rapid tempo inside his chest, Perry slowly opened his eyes.

And found himself staring at his old Club 17 jacket, a memento of the bar where he'd worked in college. His gaze moved past the jacket and traveled a mound of clothes, memorabilia, and other assorted junk to the black rectangle of the open closet.

"Holy Christ, you freakin' loser." He wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry. All at once his terror was gone, replaced by sheepish embarrassment.

With the lights on, it all seemed so obvious. The thumping he'd heard? Things falling in the closet, at least some of them with enough force to push the door open, which he'd run into. The darkness? A power failure after all; if he'd looked on the other side of the house no doubt he'd have seen some of his neighbors' houses just as dark.

The sense of danger? His own stupid imagination.

And what an imagination, he thought, standing up and running his hands through his mussed hair. Bad enough that he'd believed someone had broken into the house. At least that was possible, if not probable.

But somehow his fear had morphed into pure terror, his imagined intruder turning into a monstrous creature waiting to eat him alive.

Christ, nothing like that ever happened to me before. He wondered what had triggered the unreasonable and illogical dread he'd felt, while he picked up the pistol and laid it on his desk. *I'm goddamned lucky I didn't shoot myself.*

His heart rate tripled and he jumped back a step as he caught sight of a twisted, inhuman face staring at him from the desk.

Sonofa—the stupid demon mask!

He'd left the printout next to his computer. Turning, he saw that everything that had fallen out of the closet was the crap he'd piled in front of the stolen mask, which now peered out at him from beneath an old suit.

"I guess Linda was right; sooner or later that closet wouldn't be able to hold anything else. And you, my friend," he said, pointing at the

mask, “were the last straw.” Although it hadn’t seemed like he’d overloaded the closet when he put the mask in. The door had shut easily enough.

“Maybe you were just trying to escape?” he asked the scowling figure. He’d meant it as a joke, but instead a trace of his former panic danced through him, bringing about a momentary shiver and a ghostly whisper of drums.

God, I need a drink. Stress, that had to be it. The burglaries, the money he’d lost, his fear of Linda finding out…who wouldn’t be going a little nuts?

Not that it would matter much longer. In a few days he’d have his bank account—and a normal life—back. He piled his junk and collectibles back into the closet, this time making sure to arrange things so that nothing would press against the door. Then he went downstairs to retrieve his stolen goods.

By the time he’d hidden the bags in the cellar and poured himself a whiskey, he was relaxed enough to sit in his favorite chair and catch the end of the Mets game before he went to bed.

And in the morning he didn’t remember tossing and turning his way through crazy dreams about red-eyed monsters chasing him through a jungle.

The day of what was supposed to be Perry’s final robbery was a roller coaster of good and bad, ending with a nose dive into a pit of pure awful.

He woke up tired and cranky, the same as he’d done every morning since Linda had gone to her sisters. Six days had turned into a week, and then two, as she and Tracy struggled to deal with their father’s slower-than-expected recovery from his heart surgery. For Perry, the situation was both depressing and fortuitous. Depressing because he hated being away from Linda for such an extended period.

Fortuitous because the timing couldn't have been better. For the first time in all their years of marriage Perry was glad Linda's father didn't like him. Hated him, in fact, ever since the night he'd found Perry sneaking out of Linda's bedroom window when they were just eighteen.

That loathing had led to many a strained holiday dinner—and an embarrassing argument during his and Linda's wedding reception—but now it meant him not having to accompany Linda to Tracy's house. Everyone agreed his presence would just make things harder. So it was the perfect opportunity for Perry, who didn't have to worry about his wife noticing his late night excursions. On the other hand, he'd always had trouble sleeping when she was away, and the past couple of weeks had been no exception.

It never occurred to him that there might be other reasons for him sleeping poorly.

Two cups of strong coffee wiped away most of his exhaustion, and by the time he got to work he was feeling almost like himself. A second visit to Carlo had upped his bank account to twenty-five thousand, so he only needed another twelve grand and all his losses would be covered. Almost as nice as the money was turning on his computer and seeing there were no installs or repairs on his schedule, which meant he could spend the day catching up on paperwork and going over the specs for his job that night. He'd previously printed the schematics—once again accessing Endy's folders via a remote terminal while thanking God his ex-friend was dumb enough to not change his password—and spent two nights watching the house and taking notes.

Like the other two houses he'd hit, he'd left nothing to chance. Arnold Weisman was divorced and worked nights. His wife and kids lived three towns over, so it was highly unlikely they'd show up unexpectedly. Best of all, he was at the end of a cul-de-sac, with no direct line of sight to any of his neighbors' windows.

If Weisman held true to his schedule from the previous two nights, he'd leave his house at approximately seven and not return until just after five in the morning. Perry's plan was to arrive around ten p.m. and be gone by midnight.

Then a final visit to Carlo and I get my freakin' life back.

After work, Perry grabbed a pizza and ate dinner in front of the TV, which he'd enjoyed doing the first few days Linda was gone, but now it only left him feeling empty and dejected. It was one thing to live the bachelor life short term; doing it for days on end was becoming a chore. A phone call from Linda saying she hoped to be home by the end of the week didn't help. The minute he hung up the phone, his depression set in worse than before.

"Snap out of it," he said to the empty room. Over the past week he'd found himself doing that more and more. "Focus. You've got a job to do."

With two hours to kill before he left, Perry decided to rest his eyes. A full stomach and the baseball game droning on TV were the perfect sleep aids, and in minutes he found himself drifting off.

Only to be awakened by the sound of beating drums.

Perry sat up, his senses alive as adrenaline surged through his body. The den was a dark cave with the TV illuminating a narrow swath across the center of the room. The thumping of the drums was muffled rather than coming from the TV's speakers, and his first thought was some teenager had the stereo cranked up in his car out in the street. Except when he stepped over to the open window, the phantom beat grew dimmer instead of stronger.

Perry slowly walked across the room towards the stairs, the drumming growing more distinct with each step. At the same time he grew aware of a smell in the air, a barbeque pork odor at once tantalizing and revolting, as if someone had laid rotten meat on a hot grill and slathered it with a combination of bacon and blood.

At the bottom of the stairs, Perry's hand gripped the railing but his feet suddenly refused to move forward. The tempo of the drums increased slightly and his heart beat in time with the *thump-thump-thump* of the elusive pounding. The grilled carcass odor wafted past again, this time accompanied by the smell of burning wood.

Jesus! Something's on fire!

Perry forced his feet onto the first step and then the next. He moved up the stairs, each foot a cement weight that took all his effort to lift. By the time he reached the landing to the front door he was gasping for air and holding on to the bannister for support. He turned the corner and faced the last six stairs, which seemed as insurmountable as Everest. From his vantage point he could see portions of the living room, kitchen, and hallway; nothing seemed out of place and yet nothing seemed right. There were shadows within the shadows, things that moved and swayed, objects that were short and rotund and others that were thin and stretched beyond the ceiling. Sparks of red appeared and disappeared, never in the same place twice. He couldn't be sure if they were the eyes of strange jungle beasts or embers from the fire he couldn't see.

The pace of the drumming picked up again, only now instead of *thump-thump-thump* a single word reached his ears, repeated over and over: *Ma-te, Ma-te, Ma-te.*

Perry shook his head. Drums couldn't speak! Where were the words coming from? As if in response, someone in the darkness spoke his name.

"Perry Spellman."

Somewhere in the living room something roared, a bellow of rage that shook the railing under Perry's hand. The drumming grew louder, all but drowning out the voice that came from everywhere and nowhere, so that he only caught a few words.

"…tapu…foul…sacred…"

A flash of red shattered the darkness of the hall, crimson lightning that lit everything bright as daylight for a split second, just long enough for Perry to see dozens of twisted, mutant faces leering down at him from the top of the stairs.

He cried out as the horrible mouths opened wide, exposing fangs as long as his fingers.

"*Perry…*"

In the den, Perry screamed and sprang up from the couch. Twisting around so violently his back barked in protest, he scanned the den for signs of supernatural attackers.

Nothing was there.

On the TV, the Mets were high-fiving each other and exiting the field while the announcers reminded everyone to stay tuned for the "happy recap." Blue light sprayed across the room, illuminating everything but the far corners. No shadows moved within the shadows. From upstairs, an ordinary yellow glow cascaded down from the kitchen, where as usual he'd left the lights on.

"Jesus motherfucking Christ." Perry took a deep breath, let it out slow, and then put a hand over his heart, which was slamming into his ribs like a crazed animal trying to escape a cage of bones.

A nightmare. Nothing but a goddamned nightmare.

Another deep breath and his heart started to slow. Not just a nightmare, possibly the worst one he'd ever had, and he'd had some doozies as a kid. In those days they'd been caused by the stress of his parents always fighting, separating, getting back together and fighting again. Once they'd finally divorced and he'd ended up in a reasonably stable environment living with his mother, the nightmares had stopped.

So what had brought this one on?

Foul…sacred…

Jesus, could it be that simple?

Guilt?

Were all his problems a result of feeling bad about his burglaries? The nightmare, the episode a few days back in the upstairs office? When he thought about it, the idea didn't seem too farfetched. The first time he'd freaked out was on a night he was returning from a robbery. And now he'd had a nightmare just hours before committing another crime.

The only thing that didn't make sense was the theme of the nightmare. A jungle, drums, the grotesque faces that were so much like the…

The mask in the closet.

Perry felt like slapping his own head, instead settled for just shaking it.

The mask. He'd fixated on the damn thing somehow. Either because it was the one stolen item still in his possession—a representation of his guilt—or because it was just so goddamn ugly it had made an indelible mark in his subconscious.

A small chuckle bubbled up, driving away the lingering effects of the dream.

All he had to do was get rid of the mask. With his clandestine illicit activities over, the mask gone, and his money in the bank he'd be able to—hopefully—jettison his guilt as quickly as he'd pawned the stuff he'd stolen. Sure, maybe there'd be some residual guilt and fear left over. After all, he had stolen from innocent people and there was always the chance of getting caught after the fact. But he'd done his best to take only things that were valuable but easily replaceable. TVs, iPads, expensive but common jewelry. No engraved items. Nothing that looked like a family heirloom or a rare collectible piece. Things that would covered by homeowners insurance and easy to replace.

Except for the damn mask.

What the hell had he been thinking when he took that stupid thing? He'd known it had to be a collectible. He should have just left it. Instead, he'd been lured by the chance for big money.

All of this would have been easier if he could have just broken into Endy's house and robbed his old friend blind. Made back his money and gotten his revenge all in one swoop. Too bad Endy had nothing of value except a giant collection of 1960s porn and an equally-old collection of vinyl record albums. Perry had considered all that, had checked on the possible price of selling it all, and it came up far short of thirty-seven grand.

Legal action had never been a consideration. While it might lead to a long incarceration for Endy, it wouldn't do shit for Perry's bank account. The money was either already spent or stashed in some offshore account; knowing Endy, it was the former. And if he was locked in jail, there'd be no way Endy could ever pay him back. Hell, even if Endy didn't go to jail, it would take a dozen years for him to repay what he'd stolen. By then Perry would be bankrupt and divorced.

Besides, he'd willingly given Endy all his money despite knowing Endy had planned on doubling it by selling drugs. Not that Endy was a dealer. But his brother-in-law was, and he'd asked Endy if he wanted in when his regular partner got arrested.

"A one-time thing, Perry-man," Endy had said when he'd asked if Perry wanted to go halves with him. "We give him the money and three days later we get twice as much back. That's a hundred and fifty grand for us to split."

The temptation had been too much for Perry. He could do so much with that money. Pay off bills. Get a new car. A real vacation for him and Linda.

So he'd done it.

Three days later there'd been no sign of his money.

Or Endy.

There'd be no way he could explain to the police what he'd done with his money without implicating himself in a major drug deal. No, his only chance for quick cash lay in robberies, and the only revenge he'd ever get would be seeing Endy get arrested for the thefts.

Unless I happen to see the sonofabitch in a dark street some day…

At that moment, the alarm on his iPhone went off, interrupting his lust for physical retribution and reminding him it was time to get ready.

This is it. One last hit and run and I'm done.

With a relieved smile and a happy heart, Perry dressed in his black sweats and headed for his car.

All of Perry's good feelings melted away within minutes of arriving at his target. To begin with, it had started to rain on his way to Arnold Weisman's house, which meant by the time he walked around the house, disarming the remote sensors and rewiring the keypad, he'd been soaked. That, in turn, meant he'd have to clean up all his footprints—inside and out—before he left. He wasn't worried about other forensic evidence—he wore latex gloves and had covered his head with a tight knit cap. The sweats he had on were originally Endy's—he'd found them stashed in Endy's locker at work and swiped them just for this purpose. If any hairs were recovered, they'd point another finger at Endy Almogardo. Just the way Perry wanted it. He'd even pulled loose hairs from the hairbrush Endy had in his desk drawer and left a few at each of the first two robberies.

However, slogging through a house wrapped in wet clothes was not comfortable. Plus, it was dangerous. All it would take was a quick slip on a tile floor and he could end up with a broken leg, a sitting duck until Weisman came home.

The weather was only the first crimp in his carefully thought out plan. It turned out Weisman was either very mistrusting or he had a

major case of OCD—or both. Unlike the other two homeowners, Arnold Weisman didn't keep any valuables out in the open. Or even in the usual storage spots. Cabinets, closets, dressers—Perry searched them all, growing more and more frustrated as each one turned up only junk. At the end of an hour all he had to show for his efforts was a decent Rolex and a pocket digital camera worth maybe two hundred bucks. The stereo system was built into the wall, the TVs too large for one person to carry, and it appeared he didn't collect anything.

This can't be all of it. The guy is freakin' loaded. He'd have to be to pay for an alarm system like the one Endy installed.

It wasn't until he'd gone down into the basement that he'd finally hit the mother lode. There he'd discovered a back room with a door that had been secured with three different types of locks, and once Perry opened them he'd understood why.

The room was like something out of a geek-boy's wet dream.

Shelf after shelf of first edition comic books. Autographed baseball cards from the twenties all the way to the present day. Other signed sports memorabilia as well, from footballs to baseballs to jerseys. A Captain Kirk action figure in the box, with William Shatner's signature on the front. An entire bookshelf loaded with autographed first edition hardcovers.

"This is more like it," Perry whispered, and then he thought again.

What was he supposed to take? He only had limited space in his three duffel bags, and things like books and comics not only took up a lot of space, they were heavy as hell. Plus, he had no idea which ones were the most valuable. Did you go by what was the oldest? Or what was signed by the most famous person? And considering he didn't recognize half the names and titles, would he even be able to pick out the most famous ones?

And on top of it all, which ones were one of a kind and which ones would Carlo be able to fence?

Cursing his luck at having found a treasure trove and not having a damn idea of what to do with it, Perry decided to hedge his bet and go for middle-of-the-road items. Baseball cards from the forties and fifties. Comic book titles he recognized: Spider-Man, The Avengers, Superman, The Fantastic Four. Books by Stephen King, Bill Clinton, George Bush, and Ray Bradbury.

At the end of his second hour in the house, Perry had filled two duffel bags and decided to call it quits due to their weight. No way he could carry a third, not without making two trips. And doing that would double his chances of being seen, not to mention getting wet in the rain again and having to—

Jesus Christ. I forgot about the rain.

He looked down at the duffels. They were canvas; heavy duty but not waterproof. And while it wasn't a far walk to the car, it was far enough that he might very well end up with water soaking through the bags and ruining the books he'd taken.

"Goddamnit!" It seemed like nothing was going to go right.

He hefted the bags upstairs and left them by the door, then made his way through the house to the mammoth kitchen. Once again his luck seemed to have deserted him, because Weisman apparently kept nothing where it was supposed to be. All he wanted was a couple of large plastic garbage bags to wrap around the duffels, but he couldn't find them in any of the usual places. Nothing under the sink. Plenty of canned goods and boxes of rice and pasta in the cabinets, but no bags. Even the hall closet, which contained an assortment of cleaning supplies, yielded no bags.

It took another twenty minutes of searching before he located them in the garage, of all places. By then, all he wanted to do was get the hell out of the house. He'd gotten a weird feeling in his gut, what his mother used to call butterflies, except they felt more like hyperactive weasels. He kept expecting Weisman—or the cops—to pull into the driveway, despite the fact that he was still pretty much on

schedule. By the time he had two large black garbage bags wrapped over his duffels, all he wanted to do was run for the car and get the hell back to his own house. It took a supreme effort of will not to sprint down the driveway, which would have looked suspicious. Instead, head bowed against the rain, he walked slowly and deliberately to the car, acting as if he belonged where he was.

Only when he was several blocks away, the heater going and his stolen goods safely hidden beneath a blanket in the trunk, did he start to relax, thinking maybe he'd even stop and grab a cup of coffee.

He was halfway home when red and blue lights came on behind him.

Perry's first instinct was to slam down on the gas pedal and make a desperate race for freedom. His foot actually twitched and pressed harder for a second before the logical part of his brain took control again and lifted it up. He flicked on his blinker and eased over to the curb, praying to God the cop just wanted to get past him and feeling the cold dread of certainty that he was getting pulled over. The wild animals in his stomach, which had just settled down, woke up and started their manic dance again.

The lights followed him to the side of the road and he knew a moment of blind terror.

This is it. You're caught. They've been following you since you left Weisman's and they're going to ask you to open your trunk.

Visions of being arrested, getting dragged into a police station and charged with multiple counts of burglary, filled his head. What the hell could he do? How did you talk your way out of—

Tap-Tap

Perry jumped in his seat. He'd been so frantic about the situation he hadn't noticed the cop approaching. His heart beating so fast it actually hurt, Perry rolled down the window.

"License and registration," the cop said, his monotone voice weighted down with boredom and more than a hint of annoyance. He wore a blue rain slicker over his uniform and had some sort of plastic bag wrapped around his hat. Rain water ran from the brim in miniature waterfalls.

The fact that he hadn't been asked to step out of the car, or had a gun pointed at him, eased Perry's anxiety enough so that he was able to pull his license out of his wallet and then ask the cop to hold on while he got his registration from the glove box. As he handed the cards over, he congratulated himself on keeping his voice steady.

"Is there something wrong, Officer?" he asked.

The cop ignored him and shined a flashlight on the license. Then he stared at Perry with eyes that were both tired and disinterested. For a moment, Perry wondered if the man was even a cop at all, if perhaps he was actually a serial killer roaming the streets and using a stolen cop car to pull people over.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cop handed back the two plastic squares.

"Your taillight is busted. Light's still on, but the plastic is broken. Better get it fixed." The cop turned and walked away, leaving a stunned Perry to stammer a belated thank you before rolling up his window.

Perry wasted no time putting his car into gear and pulling back onto the road, making sure he used his blinker. He watched to see if the cop followed, but the road stayed dark behind him. Coffee forgotten, he took the shortest route home, making sure to keep to the speed limit and use his turn signals.

Once inside the safety of his garage, he shut the motor off and sat there, eyes closed, and focused on deep, calming breaths. Only when he had his pulse under control did he enter the house. Even then, he was

too keyed up to sleep. Thanking his stars he'd escaped a trip to jail, he opened a beer and booted up his laptop to start checking prices on the memorabilia he'd swiped. The sooner he got rid of it the better, but he didn't want to get totally ripped off by Carlo, either. He needed some basic information so he could negotiate.

He stayed on the laptop for another hour and then decided to call it a night when he found himself staring at the screen with no idea of what he was reading.

After plugging his phone in to recharge, Perry made his way upstairs to get ready for bed. He had the late shift the next day, which meant he could sleep late and still have time to run some errands and visit Carlo before work.

Just as he was entering the bathroom, he paused. Something wasn't right. He couldn't say what, but there'd been something, just on the very edge of his peripheral vision. Something…different? Out of place? Frowning, he turned and looked down the hall towards the living room. Although there were no lights on in the kitchen or living room, the hall light provided enough illumination for him to see that everything was where it should be.

He shifted his gaze in the other direction. Nothing amiss there, either. He could see part of the main bedroom through the open door, and the office was…

Wait. There's a mark on the wall.

That's what had registered on his subconscious. A dark smudge—more than a smudge, really, more like a stain—on the wall right before the door to the office. So faint you could mistake it for a shadow, which is what his conscious eye had done, but something deep in his brain had recognized that nothing in the hallway ever cast a shadow on that particular wall.

Perry walked over to it, his worst fear that there might be a pipe leaking behind the sheetrock. Getting a plumber in the middle of the night was bound to be expensive, and if there was a leak he sure

couldn't wait until the morning. Cursing his bad luck and hoping it was just a big dirt streak, he placed his hand on the spot to see if it was damp.

There was a moment when he felt a surge of joy because the wall was completely dry, and then it hit him that it wasn't just dry, it was warm.

Very warm.

Suddenly there was a possibility much worse than water damage.

Fire.

He'd seen plenty of houses that caught fire from faulty wiring to know it was a real possibility. There was no outlet in that area of the hall, so he ran into the office to see if anything on the other side of the wall was smoking. Or worse.

Except on the other side of the wall was the closet.

"Shit!" He didn't remember there being an outlet in the closet, but that didn't mean one wasn't present. It had been so long since he'd even seen the inside of that crammed space. And was that a red glow under the door?

Frantic, he threw open the door and began burrowing into the closet, tossing things over his shoulders with no regard for value or where they landed. Clothes, memorabilia, the Polynesian mask, it all got cast aside as he tried to find the source of the fire before it grew too large to contain.

It only took a minute to empty the lower half of the small space, but it was the longest minute of Perry's life. And then his hand struck sheetrock and he was staring at the back of the closet, where a darker smudge marred the wall.

Immediately, he knew it wasn't an outlet. Wires inside the wall were igniting something. Which meant there was no time to waste. Stumbling over the disarray on the floor, he raced back into the hall and

slammed his foot into the center of the gray smudge, which had grown larger, almost as big around as a basketball.

The sheetrock dented and crumbled where he'd struck it. He kicked it again and again, opening a space between two beams until he could get his hands in and tear larger sections out. By then he could smell the acrid tang of overheated metal.

Another section came free and he jumped back as a puff of smoke rose up. Once he was certain no flames waited to burn his face, he leaned forward and peered into the hole.

Where he found a large field mouse, its fur smoldering and liquid oozing from the holes where its eyes had been, sandwiched between two electrical wires. Patches of shiny copper glinted where insulation had been chewed away, and the mouse's jaws were locked around the cable.

"Holy fuck." It seemed impossible, but there it was. His house had almost burned the fuck down because of a goddamned mouse in the wall.

"I should let you burn, motherfucker. Except you're already stinking the place up."

A spark shot into the air, and Perry remembered he still needed to deal with the problem quickly. A real fire could start at any second. He hurried back into the office, where he rummaged through the desk drawers until he found a plastic letter opener. Using the pointed end, and careful to not let his fingers touch the mouse or the wires, he pried the charred corpse off the wire and dropped it onto the floor. Then he made a quick trip to the garage and shut off the power to the office and hallway. He'd have to call an electrician in the morning, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about the house going up in flames during the night.

An electrician and an exterminator, he amended. *If there's one mouse, there's probably a bunch.*

He added them to his list of things he planned to do the morning, one of which was get rid of the demon mask. During one of his breaks at work he'd Googled the local Salvation Army and veterans groups who took donations of clothes, furniture, and artwork. Since he couldn't sell the stupid Polynesian mask, he figured he'd donate it, using Endy's name. That way he'd get rid of it and add to the evidence against Endy regarding the burglaries. He went back into the office and dragged the mask out. It was warm to the touch and he again thanked his lucky stars that it hadn't caught fire inside the closet. He put on a pair of rubber gloves, wiped the mask down with furniture polish, and then slid it into a garbage bag.

Only then did he finally finish getting ready for bed.

That night, Perry's dreams were ablaze with fire and evil laughter, and a voice that called out to him and told him to beware.

"You've got to be bullshitting me." Perry looked at Carlo and wished he had the nerve to tell his old school buddy what he really thought.

You're a goddamned low-life bastard! Don't you dare try to cheat me out of my money, you cheap fuck!

Except nothing good would come of that, and in truth something very bad might be the result. You could bitch to Carlo, but you couldn't insult him. Not if you wanted to keep your legs intact.

"Hey, I take offense to that," Carlo said, some of his usual good humor draining away. A clear warning that Perry was about to overstep the bounds of their so-called friendship. "I told you why I can't pay more."

He had, too, but Perry wasn't sure it was the truth. According to Carlo, trying to resell baseball cards and comics was a long process, both because the big-time collectors all knew each other and someone was bound to recognize stolen property, and because the market wasn't

anywhere near its peak anymore. He'd told Perry that he'd probably have to hang on to the boxes of stuff for months or even years before he sold it all, and that not only meant a long time to wait for his profits, but also an increased chance of getting nabbed by the cops.

So he'd offered Perry only one quarter what the stuff was worth on eBay, a grand total of four thousand dollars.

A number that meant Perry was still far short of returning his bank balance to where it needed to be, which would mean pulling yet another job before Linda came home.

All of which had Perry frustrated to the point where he was ready to scream. With his nerves already frayed from another restless night and the knowledge that he'd have to shell out money for the electrician and exterminator, it was all he could do to keep from pounding the table.

"Christ, Carlo. Can't you do a little better?"

"Take it or leave it, Perry." Carlo's voice held a note of finality in it, which Perry understood meant 'leave it' as in not only leave the four grand, but also any future deals. He had Perry by the balls and knew it.

Shit.

"Okay, I'll take it." Perry waited while Carlo counted out a handful of bills and passed them over.

"Take my advice," Carlo said, as he stashed the comics and cards under a counter. "You want quick cash, and lots of it, you gotta stick with the stuff that sells fast. Not this collectible shit, you get what I mean?"

"Yeah. I got it. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Perry walked out, the drumbeat back in his temples again, wondering what the hell he was going to do. He knew what Carlo wanted—more electronics, loose gemstones, anything untraceable. The problem was, now he was rushed for time and had no fourth prospect lined up.

Guess I gotta check Endy's list of clients again.

That meant a trip to the local library during his break, so he could access Endy's files remotely. After a ten-minute detour to drop off the stolen mask at the Salvation Army Outlet Store, he got himself a cubicle in the library and prepared to do his research.

Except when he tried to log in, he found that Endy's account had been closed.

Hell. Perry stared at the computer screen in frustration. *Management finally got around to deleting his access. Now what do I do?*

He tried thinking of possible solutions, but in the end he had to admit his only choice was to pull a name from his own client list. He'd wanted to tie all the robberies to Endy, but it looked like the best he'd be able to do for this last one was pick a house he and Endy had worked on together. Something from way back when they'd first started with the company.

And cross my fingers they never upgraded to a better system.

He didn't want a search of his own files on any records, so he had to rely on his memory, which only provided three names. Two of them he knew for a fact were likely to be home on a weeknight because they had children. The third, the Driesens, were an elderly couple who lived on the other side of town, in a neighborhood of small high ranches and Cape Cods. He couldn't remember if there'd been anything of high value on display when he'd been there, but he did recall the Driesens being very afraid of getting robbed, which had to mean there was something in the house they wanted to protect. Plus, both husband and wife were pretty hard of hearing, so even if they were home he should still be able to move around without them waking, as long as he didn't venture upstairs.

When he arrived back at his desk, there was a message on his machine from Linda.

"Hi, it's me. I tried your cell but as usual you didn't answer. Good thing I'm not stuck in a ditch. Anyhow, I'll be home tomorrow night or the night after for sure. Miss you and can't wait for some major catching up! Love you. Bye."

Frowning, Perry reached for his phone and found only an empty pocket. He had forgotten the damned thing again; it was sitting home in the charger.

Once Linda's home I won't be able to sneak out at night. That means the only chance of hitting the Driesens is tonight.

He hated the thought of breaking into a house that he hadn't spent a couple of nights watching, but it looked like he didn't have a choice. His shift ended at ten. He could grab something to eat and then head to the Driesens' house just before midnight. They were bound to be asleep by then. That would leave all the following day, Thursday, for the electricians to do their work and him to visit Carlo and the bank. He'd already taken the day off, so he typed a quick email to his boss saying he needed Friday as well, because of his wife coming home. Everyone knew what was happening with Linda and her family, so there'd be no problem getting the time.

Then he spent the rest of his shift finishing paperwork and counting the minutes until ten.

Perry stared at the Driesens' house and wondered what he'd done to deserve such a string of bad luck. Not only were they both home, but there was a light on in the back of the house and the silhouette of someone moving around. All he could figure was that at least one of them had either gotten up for a glass of water or something to eat.

That left him with two options: find another house, or wait until the Driesens were upstairs and asleep. He decided to wait, figuring they had to go to bed sometime.

Sometime ended up being just after one in the morning. Then he forced himself to wait another hour as a precaution. By the time he snipped the alarm wires and eased in through an unlocked window, it was just after two a.m. and he was already exhausted.

The downstairs of the house was much like he remembered, considering he hadn't been inside in years. Carpet, wallpaper and furniture thirty years out of date. Pictures of children and grandchildren on the walls and mantle. A cabinet of curios, none of which looked very valuable.

A pervasive smell that he could only describe as "old person" enveloped him as he moved from room to room. It was a combination of lavender, dust, Ben-Gay and a thousand home-cooked meals all tied together with musty cat piss. It was a smell that instantly told you the homeowners rarely opened the windows and occasionally forgot to let out the pets. Or at least he hoped they did; if they didn't own a cat then it meant one or the other of the Driesens had a problem with incontinence.

A quick look through the living room, kitchen, and family room was all Perry needed in order to know he wouldn't be hitting a jackpot on the first floor. He moved to the stairs that led to the second floor, and then paused, remembering what he'd found in the last basement.

Why not check there first before taking a chance on waking someone up? Reversing his direction, he returned to the kitchen and headed downstairs.

With the door shut behind him, he allowed himself the small risk of turning on the lights. Dirty, bare ceiling bulbs did little to drive away the darkness, and he found it necessary to still keep his penlight on. At first glance it seemed like a dead end as far as valuables were concerned. Jars and cans occupied dusty shelves, far too many for one couple to eat. Another metal rack held nothing but cleaning supplies and soaps stacked in military-precise height and brand order. A third shelf unit was actually bowing under the weight of more canned goods.

Christ. They must be hoarders. Or maybe those nutty extreme coupon clippers.

Additional shelves held paper towels, toilet paper, napkins, boxes of rice and cereal and dog food.

And they don't even own a dog.

As he moved through the basement, his flashlight bouncing from one row of stockpiled goods to the next, Perry forgot his mission, sidetracked by his amazement at the collection of goods that rivaled a small supermarket.

Until he walked past the last rack and found himself face-to-face with a hideous monster.

"Ahhh!" He couldn't stop the short scream from escaping as the twisted, grotesque countenance seemed to lunge towards him. The flashlight fell from his hand and he turned to run but instead smashed into the corner of a metal shelf rack, sending a dozen boxes of cereal to the floor and opening a gash on his cheek. His foot came down on a box and it shot out from underneath, sending him to the cement floor. He hit hard, his teeth clacking painfully together and his elbow slamming down at just the right spot so that lightning bolts of red-hot agony raced up and down his arm.

Positive the horrendous creature was at that very moment reaching out to drive razor-sharp claws into him, Perry gritted his teeth against the pain and rolled over, one hand coming up to defend his face while the other groped futilely for anything that might serve as a weapon against the thing that was about to disembowel him.

Except nothing happened.

No claws gouged his arms. No teeth bit into his flesh. No sounds announced the presence of the creature, not a roar, not even a snort of hot breath.

He was alone.

Confused and wary of a trap, Perry slowly got to his feet and peered around the corner. His penlight lay on the floor, casting a tiny arc of yellow across the cement. He raised his gaze, searching the shadows and corners, looking further down the room…

There!

Perry gasped as he saw it. The monstrous face, still leering at him from the far side of the room. It hadn't moved, and he wondered if maybe it…

His thoughts stopped in mid-sentence as his brain registered something familiar about the thing. His confusion increased even as his fear lessened. Never taking his eyes off the thing, he bent and retrieved the flashlight, shined it on the object he already recognized but couldn't accept.

Brought into detail by the light, there was no denying it.

The mask? How could it…?

It didn't seem possible, but leaning against the concrete wall of the Driesen's' basement was the Polynesian demon mask in all its terrifying glory. The same angled eyes, the same evil sneer, the same jagged teeth…it wasn't a similar mask, it was identical.

The same one he'd left at the Salvation Army twelve hours earlier.

Dammit! Perry's heart thudded into overdrive as understanding burst to life in his brain. *Someone's on to me! There can't be two of them, and the Driesens sure as hell aren't buying primitive artwork at the Salvation Army. Someone followed me there, and then followed me here as well. Snuck into the basement while I was upstairs.*

But who? Not the police. They'd simply wait for him to break in and then arrest him. Carlo? That wouldn't make sense, either. He was making a nice profit off Perry's thefts.

Endy.

It had to be. His former friend must've found out what Perry was doing and decided to play a nasty prank on him before…

Before what? Before turning him in?

Before killing him?

Perry turned and hurried towards the stairs as fast he could in the dim light. The who and why weren't as important as getting the hell out. Whatever was going on, it wasn't anything that boded well for one Perry Spellman. His best bet was to get the hell back home and then figure things out.

He was almost to the stairs when he noticed a huge pile of paper towel packages on the floor obstructing his way. He automatically turned down between two shelf units, intending to go around and then cut back to the stairs when it hit him that the pile hadn't been there before.

"Perry Spellman."

The unexpected voice was low and angry and seemed to come from all around him.

A trap! his mind screamed, while at the same time he tried to slow his forward momentum. But it was too late. There was something blocking the space between the two shelf units, something oval-shaped and dark with two points of red in the middle. Another step brought it into view and Perry cried out in terror at the sight of it.

The mask!

He tried to twist around and squeeze past it but there wasn't room and instead he slammed into a set of shelves. Jars and cans tumbled everywhere as he headed for the floor again, this time striking his knees and elbows and what seemed like every other bone in his body as he careened off the metal poles and cement multiple times before his head finally hit something hard and the world disappeared into a blackness filled with the sound of drums.

And a guttural voice that spoke his name over and over.

Perry woke to the sounds of voices above him.

"…don't go down there, you old fool! Just call the police."

"And look like a fool when it turns out a raccoon got into the cellar? Not on your life. I'll just take a quick look. Now gimme that flashlight!"

The arguing continued while Perry slowly regained his senses. The back of his head throbbed like someone was tapping on it with a hammer and there was a moment of dizziness as he pushed himself to his feet. It disappeared rapidly, though, as he remembered where he was and what had happened.

The Driesens. I can't have been out too long if that's them upstairs, getting ready to call the cops or come down here. Into the basement. I was…

The mask!

He looked all around but there was no sign of the freakish carving. Frowning, he moved to the bottom of the stairs, the aisles empty except for the mess he'd made during his attempted escape.

What the hell…was I seeing things?

Had his guilt and fear gotten so out of control that he was cracking under the pressure?

It doesn't matter. Not now. All that matters is getting the fuck out of here before the cops show up.

Except how was he supposed to do that? The Driesens were right upstairs. Sure, they were old. He could probably just rush past them, knock them down and run out of the house. But violence wasn't really his thing; he had no desire to hurt an innocent person, whether on purpose or by accident. Besides, if he did that and then still got caught, there would be added charges of assault. Not what he wanted.

Perry glanced around the cavernous basement. There had to be windows. He'd seen them from the outside. It was just a matter of locating them. He returned to the spot where he'd fallen and located his penlight, which was still on. Aiming the tiny beam around, he walked along the aisles of shelves until he found a window set high up on a wall. A quick examination showed it was a simple latch type that opened inwards. He pulled it down but the space it provided wasn't nearly large enough to squeeze through.

If he could get the square pane of glass completely off, however…

The sounds of arguing escalated upstairs and it sounded to Perry like old man Driesen was winning. That meant very little time was left. Throwing caution to the wind, Perry grabbed the edges of the window pane and yanked down as hard as he could. With a little twisting, he was able to pry the metal arms right off the frame. Making no effort to keep quiet, he dragged a box of canned goods over to the window and used it to boost himself up. It was still a tight fit, and he was only halfway out when a hand wrapped around his calf and pulled hard on his leg.

"Gotcha!"

Perry dug his fingers into the ground and dragged himself forward across damp grass, flailing and kicking with his legs at the same time. His foot struck something soft and he heard the old man cry out. At the same time, the pressure on his leg disappeared. With a final push from his knees he slid free of the window, scraping skin from his waist in the process. Praying he hadn't hurt the old man too badly, he got up and sprinted for his car.

Two minutes later, he was on his way home with alternating visions of police cars and demon masks coming after him.

The early morning hours of Thursday were an exercise in Hell for Perry. He spent them on the couch drinking coffee and watching the dark square of the window that faced the front of the house, expecting at any moment to see the driveway lit up by police cars.

His hands trembled and his foot tapped an erratic rhythm on the carpet while his mind raced with different scenarios, none of which ended well for him. He couldn't imagine the police not coming for him; after all, he'd bungled the robbery in practically every way possible. How many times had he fallen in the basement? Twice? Three times? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He had to have left some kind of evidence behind. Plus the way he cut himself on the window frame—that wasn't just evidence, it was goddamned DNA! Add to that shoe prints, and probably tire prints as well…he was a goner. It was just a matter of how quickly the police tracked him down.

By the time the sun peeked over the horizon to announce the arrival of Thursday morning properly, Perry was already wired from caffeine and adrenaline and unable to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time.

The sound of something falling over upstairs made him cry out and jump from the couch, spilling coffee in the process.

"Perry Spellman."

The same voice from the Driesens' house! Only now it was in one of the rooms above him, either the office or the guest bedroom.

Endy! It had to be him. Playing some kind of weird game, disguising his voice. Or using a recording.

It doesn't matter. What matters is he's in my fucking house again!

Perry ran up the stairs and into the office. No one was there, but the closet door was open just a crack.

"You son of a bitch, I know you're in there," Perry said, his voice almost an animalistic growl as he stalked across the room. Fully prepared to beat the living hell out of his former friend, he threw open the door and raised his fist.

And then screamed and jumped back.

Staring at him from the darkness of the closet was the Polynesian mask.

"Endy!" He shouted the word so loud that his throat actually hurt. "You motherfucker! I know you're here! Come out and face me like a man!"

Perry ran from room to room, alternating between calling Endy a coward and demanding he stop playing games. After searching the top floor, he descended to the first floor and went through every room. Then it was the garage. With no luck there, he went back up the stairs and into the attic. By the time he was finished, every closet door stood open and sweat dripped from his forehead and neck. He'd found no sign of Endy or any kind of device that could have played a recording.

Assuming Endy had somehow snuck out, Perry returned to the office and hoisted the offending mask in his arms. His fear of the police momentarily forgotten, he stowed the mask in the front seat of his car and threw the car in reverse, his destination firmly in mind.

Endy's house.

Let the rat bastard know I'm on to him. He can't scare me with this fucking thing anymore.

The first hints of morning traffic were beginning as Perry pulled up in front of the tiny, unassuming two-bedroom ranch. Somewhere out of sight someone was playing music too loud, the *thud-thud-thud* of a bass drum sending vibrations through Perry's seat and through his body. He looked around but couldn't see anyone on the streets or in their yards.

There was no car in Endy's driveway and the lawn looked like it hadn't been mown in a month, but that didn't deter Perry. He figured Endy was just making sure the place looked empty. Satisfied no one was watching, Perry took the mask and flung it towards the front steps. It didn't reach, but it landed close enough so that anyone approaching the porch would be sure to see it.

Good enough to get a message across.

Perry hit the gas and sped down the street. The seismic drumming faded away as he left the neighborhood.

Next time I'll toss a can of gas and a match. See how he likes that.

When he arrived home, there was a message from Linda waiting for him on his voice mail.

"Good morning, sweetheart! I'll be home late tonight. I'm leaving this afternoon for sure, I promise. Call me when you get this."

Perry groaned. In all the craziness, he'd forgotten about Linda's imminent return. He pounded his fist against the kitchen counter. It was all too much! The police, the money, Endy…what the hell was he supposed to do?

And that's when the idea came to him.

Vacations.

People were always going on vacations. And many of those with service contracts contacted the company ahead of time, instructing them to bypass the usual protocols if the house alarm went off and immediately alert the police. All he had to do was get into the master files, see who was on vacation, and then take a quick trip over there while the neighbors were at work. If he was lucky, he might even find one of Endy's accounts on the list.

This time Perry used his own computer, because it wouldn't be suspicious for him to log on from home on a day off. He checked his email and then accessed the master list, scrolling through the names but not opening any of the files, so there'd be no trace of his visit. He felt like shouting for joy when almost immediately he found one of Endy's recent customers on the vacation list.

He planned on completing his break in during the mid-morning hours, but there were still the police to worry about. God knew they could show up at his house any time. Figuring he had a better chance of

avoiding arrest by staying on the move, he changed his clothes and then spent the next two hours driving aimlessly around town, until he couldn't take waiting anymore.

The house he'd chosen sat in the middle of a secluded street. Perry parked one street over and then walked to his target, his outfit very different from his previous robberies. This time he'd chosen a gray suit and black shoes. He carried a leather briefcase in one hand. His hope was that a well-dressed businessman wouldn't arouse any suspicions. He could be homeowner, a salesman, or just someone on their way to work.

With a quick prayer that all nosey housewives were otherwise occupied, he walked up the driveway and around to the back of the house. There he made quick work of the lock on the garage door and hurried inside. He had about forty seconds to disarm the keypad before the silent alarm triggered.

According to the count in his head, he made it with fifteen seconds to spare.

Just in case he was wrong, though, he headed directly to the upstairs bedroom. This time there'd be no casual searches, no hemming and hawing over what to take. It was strictly jewelry, which he tossed into his briefcase. Bracelets, rings, watches, earrings, broaches. Anything he could find with jewels or gold. He didn't care if Carlo didn't give him a fair price, as long as he made enough to replenish the remainder of what he'd lost. A hasty search through the drawers in the bedroom also revealed an envelope with eight hundred dollars in it, which Perry stuck into his pocket.

Then it was back out the garage and down the sidewalk, walking as if nothing in the world was wrong. Although he kept his face forward, he did his best to scan the nearby houses for any signs of faces in the windows or curtains falling back into place.

He saw nothing.

Once in his car, he drove right to Carlo's shop, calling just before he got there to say he was stopping by and that it was important. As he expected, Carlo was waiting by the back door, an eager look on his face. He knew important not only meant good merchandise, but also the opportunity to get the merchandise at a great price.

Twenty minutes later, Perry left the shop with exactly twelve thousand dollars in his pocket, not counting the cash he'd swiped at the house. He figured he could have gotten twice that amount if he hadn't been so desperate, but it didn't matter. He had enough to bring his account back up to where it should be. The extra cash he'd use to pay for the electrical work in the house and take Linda out for a nice dinner.

Better pray it's not your last supper, his subconscious reminded him. He grimaced, the idea of doing jail time once again digging its claws into his guts.

At the bank, he made sure to take his deposit to an assistant manager rather than a teller, just like he'd done the previous times.

"Another big deposit, Mr. Spellman," the man said. He didn't exactly have a suspicious look on his face, but it wasn't his usual friendly smile, either.

"Let's just say I'm not the investing type," Perry said, using one of his rehearsed explanations. It was the first time the man had made any comment. When the banker's eyes narrowed in a frown, Perry launched into the second part of his story, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"A friend offered me the chance to double my money on a sure thing. It didn't pan out. I was lucky to make my money back before my wife found out. Between you and me, that's a friend I won't be speaking to for a long time."

"Very lucky," the banker said, handing over the stamped deposit slip. His expression had changed again, this time to one of obvious disgust. Any other time and Perry might have felt annoyed at being judged. However, this time it was exactly what he'd hoped for. Let the

dumb shit think Perry Spellman had a gambling problem, as long as it kept him from mentioning the unusual deposits to a supervisor.

Back in his car, Perry leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes as he let out a long sigh of relief. He was beginning to think maybe his luck was finally turning around. He'd made his money back, which meant no more robberies. Linda was returning home, meaning there'd be some semblance of a normal routine again. He hadn't let the house burn down.

And he was beginning to think maybe, just maybe, the police weren't looking for him. He'd passed several patrol cars during the day—the sight of each one causing a minor heart attack—and not one of them had paid him any attention. If the cops wanted him for questioning, surely they'd have his license plate number and a description of his car.

Maybe they're not looking into the break-in because nothing was stolen. They must have bigger crimes to solve, right?

The possibility gave him some small comfort, although it didn't stop him from doing two drive-bys of his house before he pulled in, just in case the cops were staking it out. Not that he had any idea of what he'd do if they were. Run? Where? It wasn't like he was going to leave the country and start a new life. Or buy new identities for him and Linda.

No, he was pretty much fucked if the police really were looking for him.

After a call to Linda, who said she should be home by nine, Perry tried to take his mind off his potential arrest by cleaning the house. It didn't work, but keeping busy was better than just sitting around obsessing over things. He checked his email a couple of times as well, personal and work. Nothing out of the ordinary, which meant the cops hadn't gone to his job.

After he had the house ready for Linda's return, he opened a beer and considered his situation.

Elkwood was a decent-sized city. Not a huge one like LA or New York or Chicago, but still pretty big. Big enough to warrant three zip codes within the city limits. There had to be, what, dozens of robberies every week. If not more.

How much attention were his going to draw?

He hoped none, especially since there wouldn't be any others. Even if they did, Endy would be the first suspect. After all, Perry's only goofs had been at the Driesen house. There really was nothing to tie him to the other robberies.

Except Endy.

That was the real monkey wrench. What was Endy up to? How had he found out about the robberies? And why play practical jokes on Perry instead of just making an anonymous call to the cops?

Because if he exposes you, he gets exposed, too.

Which meant he had something else in mind. Revenge? Or maybe it was just scare tactics, just a message to let Perry know he was watching.

If that was the case, then everything should stop, because I've stopped. Unless he's worried about me framing him.

Perry ran his hands through his hair. Endy could be in the process of a reverse frame, some kind of plan to shift the blame away from himself and back to the real perpetrator.

"Christ." It was all too confusing for Perry. He wasn't a criminal; he was just a guy who'd been burned by a friend and pushed to the edge to keep his wife from finding out.

And look where he'd ended up.

Perry finished his beer and opened another. Things were out of his hands. The cops, Endy, it was all too much.

"Fuck it." He chugged half the beer down. There was nothing he could do but wait. Wait to see if he got arrested. Wait to see what Endy did next. Wait for Linda to come home.

"And while I'm waiting, I might as well drink. What the hell. I don't have to work until Monday!" He pulled two more beers from the fridge and went downstairs. The time on the cable box showed just after four, more than enough time to watch some of the game and shower before Linda got home.

It didn't take long, though, before he found it getting harder and harder to keep his eyes open. The somnambulistic pace of the game, together with the beer, had him fighting to stay awake.

It was a fight he never had a chance of winning.

Perry opened his eyes to darkness and a distinct feeling something had woken him, but he had no idea what. A sound? A touch?

A sense of déjà vu set his skin tingling and the hairs on his arms rose to attention. Wide awake now, he rose from the couch and went to the bottom of the stairs. Behind him, the TV droned on, the voices of old sitcom stars creating a background noise that made it hard to hear any sounds that might be coming from upstairs. The cable box read 8:42.

Close to nine. Was it Linda upstairs? Why hadn't she woken him when she'd come in?

Something went *thump,* loud enough that he heard it distinctly despite the chatter of the TV.

He gritted his teeth. *Endy! It had to be. He'd broken in again, just like before. Was probably doing something to mess with my head again.*

Not this time.

There were only three ways in and out of the house. One through the downstairs door that led to the garage. Upstairs there was a front door and back door.

Instead of going up the stairs, Perry slid the love seat over and blocked the steps. Then he eased open the door to the garage, exited through the side door, and went around to the back. He knew the back door would be unlocked; it always was, unless they planned on being gone for more than a day. As quietly as he could, he went up the steps to the back deck and opened the sliding door just enough so he could slip into the kitchen. From there it was just a few steps across the tiled floor to the hallway, which he accomplished without a sound, trailing his hand along the counter to help guide his way through the near-darkness. A faint vibration reached him through his feet and his hand, a sensation like someone was playing music in another room, although he couldn't hear anything.

Before leaving the kitchen, he paused just long enough to slide a large knife from the butcher block on the counter. Then he stepped into the hallway.

A thin spray of light fanned out from beneath the office door.

Definitely Endy, Perry thought. *If Linda had come home early she'd have either woken me up or just gone straight to bed.*

His anger rose up, a physical presence that threatened to erupt in the form of a primal scream.

Got you now, you motherfucking bastard!

He stormed down the hall, already laughing in his head at how perfect the whole situation was. He'd beat the hell out of an "intruder" and then call the cops, who would not only pin the other robberies on Endy but likely any evidence at the Driesens', too; it would look like Endy had tried to frame his former co-worker for everything. Instead, he'd be the one taking the fall.

Perry didn't even bother turning the knob. He kicked the door just below the handle, breaking the lock and frame in the process and sending the door flying open. He leaped into the room, knife held high.

"Got you, motherfucker!" he shouted, echoing his own thoughts of a moment earlier.

An empty room stared back at him.

It took Perry several seconds to notice the room wasn't quite empty after all. A body lay face down on the floor, a puddle of red sauce spread out beneath it.

Perry frowned. Why was there a woman lying in spaghetti sauce in his office? What the hell kind of trick was Endy playing now?

It's not a trick, Perry. You know that. Just like you know who the woman is.

Perry felt something like a cement block land in his stomach.

His brain was right. He did know. He'd lived with that body, that blonde hair, those legs, for too many years not to recognize them instantly.

Linda.

He slowly sank to his knees, his legs not collapsing so much as lowering his body to the ground so it wouldn't topple over. His body seemed to weight a thousand pounds. He understood he was in shock, just like he understood Linda wasn't lying in sauce. He understood, yet he didn't comprehend. Not yet.

That didn't come until he saw the marks.

At first they made no sense. Strange designs drawn on her arms and legs and neck with black and red magic markers? Who would do something like that?

Then some of the red marker dripped off one arm and landed silently in the not-sauce, and he saw the markings for what they really were.

Bites.

Someone had bitten Linda over and over, sunk their teeth into her flesh until her blood flowed out…

That was when Perry lost it.

The agonized wail that had been building inside him clawed its way out and he grabbed Linda's body, turned her over so he could see

her face. A coating of blood hid it from him and he wiped his hands at it, his motions growing more frantic when the blood wouldn't go away.

It wasn't until he saw the twin black holes where her nose should have been that he realized her entire face was gone.

With a horrified gasp he fell backwards, desperate to get away from the skull-like visage staring at him with bulging, dead eyes. The true horror of her death was a sledgehammer to his chest, knocking the air from his lungs.

In that same moment, one clear thought came to him.

Endy didn't do this.

There was something much worse in the house than his traitorous friend. Something that could tear the flesh off a person, mutilate their body, without making a sound.

Despite his sudden terror, guilt filled him, making him sick in a way even the corpse on the floor couldn't.

You slept through your wife's murder. She was killed right above your head while you were dreaming.

Blood thudded in his temples, *thump-thump-thumping* until he could barely hear his own thoughts.

No, it wasn't his blood.

It was the drumming again, louder this time. Coming from the other end of the hall, in the living room or dining room. Someone was down there, tapping on the floor or the wall to psych him out.

And it was working.

Gripping the knife in his right hand and wishing he'd gone into the garage for his gun, Perry took a deep breath and prepared to face the man who'd murdered his wife.

The far end of the house was darker than before, the vague shapes of the furniture oddly distorted and somehow menacing. The drumming grew louder as he approached the living room, the *thud-thud-thud* so powerful he could feel it in his fillings.

And still he couldn't see the intruder.

As he drew even with the kitchen entrance, Perry noticed a sharp demarcation on the floor and up the walls where the shadows turned from charcoal gray to impenetrable black. He felt like he'd come upon a cave at night, an analogy that didn't help his nerves at all.

A warm breeze washed over him, carrying scents that were at once familiar and out of place: barbequed meat, offal and wet leaves. The combination left him confused; the steady pounding on the walls or floor made it even harder to think.

You're freaking out, he told himself. *Linda's dead, her killer's somewhere in front of you in the dark. Stop being an idiot and just call the damn police.*

Perry paused. He *was* being a fool. Going after a murderer with a knife? Fuck that! It was time to call the police.

Except that would mean turning his back on whoever was hiding in the dark. Of course, he could back up, but then he'd have to deal with seeing Linda's corpse again, and he didn't think he could handle that. The only phones upstairs were in the office and…

The living room.

The phone was by the couch. Only a few steps away, but if the killer was also close by…

As if in response to his thoughts, a deep, gruff voice spoke from somewhere by the back of the dining room.

"*Perry Spellman. Ma-te. Ma-te!"*

A glimmer of hope sprang to life in Perry's chest. The intruder was nowhere near him! He could dash into the living room, grab the phone, and get out.

Picturing where the end table was in his mind, he jumped forward.

And found himself falling down a soaking wet hill, mud splattering his clothes, rocks and sticks gouging his skin. The knife

tumbled away into the darkness as he clawed at the slick ground to stop his out-of-control descent.

His hip smashed into a thick tree and he cried out as electric pain raced down his leg. Turning, he wrapped his arms around the rough wood and held on while rivulets of water rushed past him and a torrential rain blasted through the canopy of a tropical forest, drenching him in seconds and nearly blinding him as it rolled off his forehead and into his eyes.

The steady pounding he'd heard in his living room was even louder now, a thundering *boom-boom-boom* that sounded like a hundred pairs of hands pounding on a hundred drums. Voices chanted in time with the beat, shouting familiar words in an unknown language.

"Ma-te! Ma-te! Ma-te! Loko inu! Loko inu!"

Another noise reached him. Something large moving through the undergrowth, crashing through bushes and vines. Between the rain and the darkness he couldn't see ten feet in any direction, but he knew whatever was coming wasn't anything he wanted to face, not if it was large enough to hear over the machine gun sound of rain on leaves.

He pushed away from the tree and staggered down the hill, which quickly leveled off to flat land. There was no time to wonder what the hell had happened, how he'd been transported to another place. Only one thing was important: finding safety.

The sounds of his pursuer grew closer and Perry tried to move faster, but it was impossible in the darkness. Branches and leaves slapped his face and arms. His feet threatened to slip out from underneath him with every step. More than once he tripped over unseen rocks or roots, catching himself at the last moment by grabbing onto a tree or vine before falling face-first into the ground.

And still the crunch and crack of breaking foliage grew closer, now accompanied by a deep-throated, raucous sound that was half laughter, half inhuman growl, like a hyena, only amplified ten-fold.

He expected to feel a heavy body crash into him at any moment, sharp claws piercing his flesh and tearing pieces away. He had no idea what was chasing him—a lion? A tiger? Something even worse?—but he had the idea it was toying with him, waiting until just the right moment before pouncing, like a cat circling a wounded bird.

"Perry Spellman!"

Hearing the animalistic voice shout his name caused Perry to stumble and fall to his knees.

What the hell was behind him? Was it a group of people chasing him? But why?

"Leave me alone!" he cried out. "I didn't do anything!"

"Perry Spellman."

The voice was no longer shouting, but somehow even more frightening in its softer, harder tone. Perry turned and faced back the way he'd come. Pushing water and hair from his eyes, he searched the darkness for some sign of his pursuer.

There was nothing but black and gray.

"Desecrator." The word came from somewhere behind him.

Perry gasped and turned in the other direction. Was that a hint of movement amid the dim shapes of the trees?

"That which is tapu is most sacred." This time the voice was to his left.

He was surrounded!

"I don't know what you're talking about! Please, just let me go!"

As he stood there, the rain lessened enough that it was no longer a downpour but just a steady drizzle. At the same time, something appeared in the jungle before him. A tiny spark of red light like a distant fire. Then there were two. He tried to calculate how far away they were. Fire meant a camp of some kind. If he could just get there…

Two more points of red appeared.

A sick feeling erupted in Perry's stomach.

He glanced behind him. Another pair of red lights. Two more pairs to his left. Now he could see they weren't exactly round, they were more oval. And angled from side to side.

Jesus God, they're eyes! All around me!

"Ma-te. Ma-te. Ma-te!" The chanting grew louder, as did the drumming accompanying it. With a start, he realized the drumming was *inside* his head as well all around him.

Something slammed into him from behind, a heavy weight that knocked him onto his stomach and sent his face into the mud. A terrible pain blossomed in his thigh, a pain like vinegar poured on an open wound. Perry screamed and rolled over but whatever had hit him was gone. He put a hand to his leg and felt warm liquid that he knew without a doubt was his own blood.

Using a tree for support, he climbed to his feet. There were more eyes in the darkness now, at least a dozen glowing pairs all fixed on him.

"Please. Let me go. Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

Another soundless attack sent him chest-first into the tree so hard he struck it and bounced off. It took a moment before he felt a new pain, this time in his left shoulder. A second later there was blood running down his arm.

"Ma-te loa. Ma-te loa."

"I don't understand!" Perry shouted, desperate to have them stop before he bled to death.

"Time to die, Perry Spellman."

"No!"

Perry pushed away from the tree and sprinted into the jungle. He no longer tried to be careful. He ran at full speed, dodging trees and branches when he saw them in the near-pitch dark, hitting them with his shoulders and arms when he didn't see them in time. He ignored the

pain, all his attention focused on getting away from the *things* that wanted him dead.

The primitive, ancient-man part of his brain understood there was nothing human after him. Something unreal, something beyond natural, was hunting him. Not Endy, not the cops. Whatever the monster was, it had killed Linda and tried to kill him. It had played games with his head, used his own guilt and fears against him. Even used the mask…

The mask!

Suddenly it became clear in Perry's head.

It was all about the mask.

He felt like a ten-ton weight had been lifted from his back. Relief and anger and humiliation surged through him all at the same time.

There was nothing supernatural going on. That's what *he* wanted Perry to believe. Him. The man who owned the mask.

Jenson Kellogg.

Somehow he'd found out Perry had stolen the idol and concocted a plan to not only get it back, but drive him crazy in the process.

He probably drugged me. Set up this whole elaborate scheme. God knows he has the money to do it.

Which meant none of it was real. Not the rain, or the jungle.

I'm probably lying on the floor, or in the bathtub. He's pouring water on me and stabbing me with my own knife.

Rage surged through Perry. The fucker had killed Linda and was torturing him all because of a goddamned idol.

"I know what you're doing!" Perry shouted into the night. "It's not gonna work. I'm on to you."

At that moment the jungle gave way to a wide, open space. Perry found himself on a beach, the sand almost white under the cloudy skies. Somewhere along the way the rain had tapered off to a fine mist. Ahead of him, an endless black ocean stretched to the horizon. To his left and right the beach was a runway of white paralleled by the sea and jungle.

The pounding of drums reverberated from within the trees, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. Perry moved away from the tree line, closer to the ocean. The steady shushing of waves on sand was familiar to him from vacations at the Jersey shore. Cool water washed over his feet and he danced away, amazed at how real the drug-induced hallucinations were. Every breath brought with it the briny scent of salt water and the thick odors of thriving vegetation and rotting leaves. Sand shifted beneath his feet and it grew harder to walk as he got further from the water line. His clothes, soaked from the rain, hung like weights from his arms and legs, making each step a mighty effort that brought him a little closer to exhaustion.

It's not real, he kept telling himself, as he slogged through the sand. *It's not real. You just have to wake up.*

Except he couldn't. His breathing grew ragged as he trudged down the beach, the drums and voices delivering a constant threat of death from within the dark tropical forest.

Without warning, a line of fire burst to life ahead of him, the conflagration stretching from water line to tree line. Dark shapes moved within the flames, silhouettes of inhuman forms. Perry turned to go back the other way and found an identical barrier behind him. As he stared at it, the line of fire began to move towards him. A quick glance in the other direction confirmed his worst fear: the other fiery barrier was doing the same thing. Any thoughts of running back into the jungle were crushed when he saw the dark shadows moving within it, their red eyes giving their presence away.

Trapped! Perry's mind whirled with frantic thoughts as he sought some way to escape. The water offered no solution; even if it wasn't real he could just as easily die from drowning in a dream as in real life. With nowhere to turn, he sank to his knees in the cool sand and held out his arms to the monsters in the jungle.

"Please! Tell me what you want. I'll do anything!"

"It is too late, Perry Spellman."

One of the dark shapes stepped forward and even from forty yards away Perry knew his life was over.

It was the Polynesian idol, only grown larger. It had the same jagged teeth, the same slanted eyes, the same sharp tusks and horns, only now it was as a tall as a man and walked on spindly legs. An equally-thin set of arms sprouted from below the giant head. The impossible creature shouldn't have been able to move, yet it walked with sure-footed agility. Other things emerged from the forest as well, shorter but no less ugly. All of them were variations on the same theme: carved totems and tikis somehow brought to life, their gigantic heads balanced atop miniature bodies.

And all of them looked angry.

"I'm sorry!" Perry shouted at them. "I didn't mean any harm. I'll bring you back! I'll turn myself in to the police! Please!"

In response, a small tiki, barely two feet high, darted forward and took a bite from Perry's leg, darting away with a quarter-sized piece of flesh in its mouth. Perry screamed and fell onto his side, clutching his injured calf.

"Hurts, doesn't it?"

The new voice startled Perry from his pain. It was human, nothing like the rough, growling tones of the idol. He looked up and saw an ordinary man standing among the tikis, staring down at him with a stern look on his face.

"Who…who are you?" Even as he asked, Perry recognized the man.

"Jensen Kellogg," the man said, confirming Perry's memory. "You've been a bad boy, Perry."

"I'm sorry." Perry felt no shame at hearing the whining tone of his voice. "I was desperate. I needed—"

"We know all about you. You made a dishonorable decision and then when things went bad, you committed dishonorable acts. The

mask was a gift. The embodiment of a sacred being, which you desecrated. You broke the law of *tapu* when you stole it. In their world, you committed a deadly sin. The Akua tried to tell you but you didn't heed his warning. And now the Akua and his offspring have come to take your soul to the underworld."

"No!" Perry got to his feet but something struck him in the back and he fell to his knees again. Thin fingers gripped his arms and shoulders, pinning him in place with supernatural force.

"Goodbye, Mr. Spellman." Kellogg gave him a mock salute and then walked into the jungle, his form quickly disappearing into the dark depths.

The Death tiki stepped closer, the smaller living idols following close behind. Its mouth opened wider and wider, until it took up the entire face below the glowing eyes.

"Ma-te! Ma-te!" the miniature tikis chanted, and although Perry had no knowledge of Polynesian languages, he understood the meaning of their intonation.

Die! Die!

Darkness closed in over Perry, a black sky in which red eyes burned like coals. Razor-sharp teeth bit into his arms, his chest, his legs.

And then there was only pain.

ELKWOOD—Police are still investigating the bizarre murder of Linda Spellman in her home last night. Her husband, Perry Spellman, is missing and wanted for questioning for both his wife's murder and a series of local robberies.

In a related story, the victim of one of those robberies, Jensen Kellogg, awoke yesterday morning to find one of the items stolen from his house, a rare, hand-carved Polynesian artifact, on his front porch.

"I don't know who took it, or who returned it, but I'm glad to have it back. It has a lot of sentimental value along with its obvious monetary significance."

Captain Arthur Ruiz stated that evidence linking Spellman and a former associate of his, Endy Almorgardo, to the robberies had been found and…

Perry opened his eyes to pure darkness. Despite being unable to see anything, he wanted to shout for joy at the fact that he was still alive, his body whole again and pain-free.

It was *a dream!*

He held his hands out in front of him, moved them around to see if he could feel anything. He had no idea where he was; all he knew was that he wasn't in his own house. That much he could tell by the rough, hard ground beneath him.

"Hello? Is there anyone there?"

A series of lights flashed on around him. Perry closed his eyes at the sudden brightness and then opened them again.

Oh, God.

Not just lights. Red lights. In pairs.

He had time for one loud scream before the Akua and its tikis attacked.

The third time Perry woke up, the Akua of Death added a new twist: it was Linda who savaged him with a shark mouth and tiger's claws, her body made of rotting flesh and all the skin gone from her face, just as she'd been the last time he saw her.

After that, Perry didn't think Hell could get any worse.

Then he discovered eternity was a long, long time.

And the gods were very imaginative.

Fatal Consequences

One of the things I like to do is take traditional tropes – zombies, vampires, werebeasts, demons – and come at them from a different angle. The great thing about classic monsters is everyone loves them. The bad thing is the traditional takes on them have been done to death. So when I decided to write a ghost story, I didn't want it to be the same old same old. And I thought, what if someone did something that caused the deaths of people he loved? How pissed would those people be? Would they still love him, or would they hate him for eternity? And rather than have it be a crime, what if it was just plain old human nature that caused all the problems?

That part of it stumped me until one day I was talking with some people and we were asking each other if you'd give up your life to save a spouse or a child, and under what circumstances would you do it? Would you step in front of a mugger's gun? Dive in front of a bus to push someone out of the way? Swim into a raging sea? If danger struck, would you stand strong or turn and run?

And then I had my idea for the book – people never know how they're going to react until they are thrust into an emergency. While we all like to think we'd be heroes, odds are we might not be.

If a man screams in the woods and no one hears him, is he really screaming?

Alec Winter stumbled over a fallen branch and wondered if he was going crazy. His aching throat was evidence that he'd screamed—screamed a lot over the past few hours, in fact—but the fact that no one had come to his aid seemed to prove the hypothesis that an action which causes no reaction isn't an action at all.

He wrapped his arms around a tall, aged elm and tried to catch his breath. The act of not moving set his mind racing. Casey—was she still alive? What if she woke up and he wasn't there? It seemed unlikely, but who knew? If she did, would she be able to walk? He hoped not. If she wandered off, how would he lead a rescue team back to her? And what if she found Nick and Sue? Seeing their ravaged bodies would probably kill her, especially in her condition.

I can't let that happen.

Alec pushed himself away from the tree and continued walking, each movement wringing fresh pain from over-used muscles and bruised limbs. Something jabbed and poked inside his chest. A broken rib? A damaged organ? It didn't matter. All that mattered was finding help. He tried shouting again but it hurt too much to draw a deep breath; all that came out was a raspy croak that couldn't even compete with the sound of his own passage through the bone-dry dead leaves and sticks covering the forest floor.

The *snap-crack-crunch* of his footsteps was a constant reminder he was in deep trouble. They'd set up their campsite only a few hundred yards from one of the smaller paths paralleling the main trail. And although things had gotten pretty confusing during his escape, when he'd finally hidden Casey's body and taken off for help he'd been pretty sure he was heading in the right direction to hit the trail again.

Except he'd been walking for what seemed like hours and there'd been no sign of any man-made paths at all, let alone the wide expanse of the Appalachian Trail.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, he looked up at the sun through summer-thick foliage. Based on its movement, and the direction of the shadows from the trees, he was still heading south. That should have put him back on the main trail in less than an hour. Had he missed it? Walked right across it in a daze?

Alec stopped again. Should he turn around? Choose a different direction? He tried to picture the map of the area in his head but all he kept seeing was the campsite, the tent torn to pieces, blood and bits of clothing everywhere…

Stop it! Focus. You have a job to do. Remember, Casey is counting on you.

Nick and Sue had counted on you. Look where that got them.

He shook his head. No time for regrets. Not now. That would come later, after they were home and safe. He took a stained, filthy rag from his pocket and wiped sweat from his forehead. A stray breeze wove its way through the trees, lending a cooling touch to his over-heated body. He was about to start walking again—*keep going south*—when he heard it.

Something crashing through the woods.

Something large.

Oh, God, no! Not again!

Had it followed him? Been behind him all this time, playing with him like a cat stalking a bird?

Alec started to run but only managed three steps before his left leg cramped up, sending him to his knees. The pain was so intense he cried out. He beat at the traitorous muscles with his fists, desperately trying to pound the spasms out of his disobedient thigh. The crashing noises grew louder and he looked around for a stick or rock he could use as a

weapon, knowing that nothing short of a gun would save him. All he came up with were leaves and twigs and dirt.

A dark figure emerged from a thicket of bushes. Alec screamed and threw his arms over his eyes, afraid to face the ravenous beast that was about to end his life.

This time there would be no running away.

For a moment there was dead silence. Then a voice spoke.

"Jesus, dude. What the hell happened to you?"

The news of David Gregg's death reached Alec while he sipped his morning coffee and read the sports pages. Casey was already up and out of the house, dropping Jennifer off at daycare on the way to work. Alec cherished what he called his quiet time, that half hour between Casey's departure and his own. With a two-year-old demanding attention all the time, any moments of silence were like a gift from God.

So he wasn't particularly happy when the phone interrupted his morning ritual.

"Alec Winter?" A woman's voice, one he didn't recognize. He answered in the affirmative, prepared to give her a piece of his mind for bothering him with a marketing call so early in the morning.

His anger crumbled away when he heard her next words.

"This is Sarah Gregg. David Gregg's wife? I…I just wanted to let you know that he…he passed away last week. I'm only calling because I think he would have wanted you to know. He always said that saving you was the best thing he ever did in his whole life, something he could be proud of. Anyhow, I didn't call sooner because we didn't have much of a service. He was…well, it wouldn't have been right."

Alec mumbled his condolences, his mind whirling as he said goodbye.

David Gregg was dead? It seemed like a bad joke. He made a note in his phone to have one of the girls at work send flowers and a card, even though the body was already buried.

Coffee and paper forgotten, he grabbed his briefcase and headed for his car.

It wasn't until hours later, after he'd fought his way through the morning emails and attended two product launch meetings, that Sarah's actual words came back to him.

"…we didn't have much of a service. He was…well, it wouldn't have been right."

Although he hadn't noticed it at the time, it was an odd way to phrase a sentence. Almost as if she'd switched thoughts in mid-stream. And she'd never said how David had died.

His curiosity aroused, Alec did a quick Google search for David Gregg's obituary.

What he found sent a shiver down his back.

Local Hero Found Dead in Woods.

The headline screamed at him from the front page of the *Daily Mail*. The article below it was short but concise.

The body of David Gregg, 52, of Greene, New York was found at the bottom of a ravine in Catskill Park. Gregg, who a year ago saved the lives of two campers in the same park, was an experienced hiker who frequently spent weekends in the park, photographing wildlife and posting his observations on nature in an Internet blog. Police do not suspect foul play, and they estimate Gregg died twenty-four to forty-eight hours earlier, but are awaiting results of the autopsy to be sure.

"Any time a body is in the woods that long, there are extenuating circumstances that make it difficult to establish a firm time of death without an autopsy," said Chief of Police Gerald Moonachie.

After rescuing Alec Winter and his wife, Casey, last July, Gregg enjoyed an upsurge in the popularity of his blog, "Observations on a Wild Life". He said at the time that helping them after the bear attacked…

Alec closed the page, unable to read any further. *He didn't just die. He died in that goddamned park. Almost a year to the day… No wonder Sarah didn't want to tell us.*

A sudden thought hit Alec with the intensity of a punch to the stomach. The date on the article had been July 12, just six days ago. The police statement said that Gregg could have died on either the 10th or 11th. If it was the 10th, that would make it…

Exactly one year.

The guy who saved us dies one year later to the day—the goddamned day!—in the same park?

It couldn't be coincidence.

Could it?

Calm down, Alec, he told himself. *Think it through.*

David Gregg was an avid hiker who spent a lot of time in Catskill Park, especially in the area near where they'd gone camping. That's why he was there that day. He'd probably been hiking and camping around that same area dozens of times since then. It was no different than if he'd been driving to work and come across an accident. He'd be driving that same route again the day after, and the day after that. So if he got into an accident himself, the odds were good it would be in the same general area.

Alec felt his heart rate slowing down. When you thought about things logically, they made more sense. It wasn't fate, it was simple coincidence. Favorable odds.

Still, it was damn freaky. But then, weren't all coincidences?

I have to tell Casey.

She'd be devastated. Not only because Gregg had died, but because it would be adding one more shitty memory to the anniversary of the worst day of her life.

I have to tell her, though. He had no choice. It was bad enough he was already keeping one secret about that day. One that constantly threatened to come out when he least expected it, rising to the surface on a wave of guilt and self-loathing so vile it made him want to puke. Adding another secret to the mix might just be the final straw, the last little bit of pressure needed to send everything tumbling free.

Yes, he had to tell her, but he didn't have to tell her now. It could wait until after work, after they'd had dinner and put Jennifer to bed. He'd pour them a glass of wine and break the news to her. Let her cry herself to sleep again and wake up in the morning purged.

Casey took the news much like Alec had expected. First there was shocked disbelief, then sorrow over his death, and finally sadness and guilt and anger over the loss of their children. Survivor's guilt, the shrinks called it. The same doctors who believed Alec suffered from it as well. Except with Casey they were right. She hated that she'd been the first one attacked, rendered unconscious through everything that followed. Because of that, she'd never even had the chance to try and save her children. To her, it was no different than if she'd done nothing, just sat there and watched while the bear turned Nick and Sue into lifeless piles of flesh. The fact that she'd been seriously—almost mortally—wounded herself meant nothing. In her mind, her injuries, and the weeks of pain and physical therapy that had followed, were her penance.

And yet she hadn't once blamed Alec. Just the opposite. To her, he was as much a hero as David Gregg. After all, he'd risked his own life in a desperate attempt to find help.

Sometimes he just wanted to shoot himself and put an end to the lie.

Like she had so many other nights, Casey burst into tears and pressed herself against him when they got in bed, sobbing about how could God be so cruel as to let them live while taking good, innocent people like Sue and Nick and now David.

As always, he held her and told her it wasn't her fault, they'd been spared because Jennifer needed them, and that maybe God's plan was for them to make sure Jen grew up and made a difference in the world. All the while, the lie festered deep inside him, a pocket of poisonous gas bubbling and growing in a swamp of guilt.

After she drifted off, he needed two antacids and a Valium to follow her into sleep.

Following Gregg's death, things actually got a little better for Alec. There was no longer a reason for Casey to follow Gregg's blog, so that last reminder of their loss was finally gone. Casey started sleeping better at night. And although their sex life didn't improve in terms of frequency, on the one night every week or two they actually did make love she seemed to really enjoy herself rather than just going through the motions for him.

After a few weeks of relative bliss, he began to think that maybe things were turning around, that their lives could be normal again. Even the demons living inside him seemed to have gone into hiding.

For the first time in a year, Alec found himself smiling when he came home from work.

Had he known what the future held for them, a smile would have been the last thing on his mind.

"All actions have consequences, people. Good or bad or just plain insignificant, there is always a reaction to each action in our lives. The scientists call it physics; the Buddhists call it karma."

Father Hayden paused and looked at the congregation. Everyone stared back in anticipation, awaiting his next words. Alec stirred in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable with where the priest's sermon was heading. He wished Jennifer would cry or fidget or whisper that she had to go to the bathroom, so he'd have an excuse to take her outside.

His face lighting up with holy glee, as if he'd just discovered the tablets of Moses, Hayden broke the heavy silence.

"I like to say, 'What goes around, comes around.' If you do good, good comes back to you. And if you do bad…well, all we have to do is look at the gossip columns in the newspapers to see what happens." He paused for breath, then continued.

"All actions have consequences. You might not see them, might not even realize they've occurred. The things you do, each and every one of you, can change not only your own life but the lives of people you don't even know. Let's take the example of a drunk driver who kills a pedestrian. That action produces an obvious consequence, one that anybody can see. Someone dies. But what if that driver calls a taxi or lets a friend drive him home? He'll never know the consequence of that action—that he saved someone's life—and we'll never see it, but it happened just the same."

Alec's guts clenched. Even though Father Hayden's gaze traveled around the room, Alec felt the man had singled him out and was pointing the finger of God's guilt his way like a second-rate oracle.

I can't take it anymore.

He whispered a quick apology to Casey and slid out of his seat, thankful they always sat at the end of the pew in case Jennifer got too loud. Doing his best to ignore the curious looks of his fellow parishioners, he hurried to the doors and escaped the suffocating

confines of the church. Once outside, he leaned against the railing and took a deep breath of the sultry, heavy summer air.

He wasn't talking to you. He doesn't know.

Alec repeated it like a mantra until his heart calmed down and he no longer felt as if he might puke.

Have to remember to thank Father Hayden for that chest-wrenching episode. In two minutes the priest had managed to rouse the old guilt monster from a slumber I was very comfortable with.

Which meant he had to be careful. If his guilt was still that close to the surface, still that raw, then anything might set it off. And if it happened in front of Casey…

No. He couldn't let that happen. Not when their marriage, their life, was finally getting back on track again.

Get your shit together, asshole. The past is the past and it needs to stay that way. Bury all those feelings, just like you buried your children.

Not the most pleasant of images, but it did the trick.

And by the time church let out, he had his lie all prepared when Casey asked what had happened.

"A little stomach problem." He gave her his best embarrassed smile. "Guess I shouldn't have had those extra sausages with breakfast."

She shook her head and laughed, never knowing the person she trusted most in life was lying to her.

Again.

That evening, two hours north of Rocky Point, where Alec and Casey were busy putting Jennifer to bed and cleaning up the dinner mess, Dr. Eddie Trano was sitting down to watch the first night of the summer Olympics. He didn't particularly care about any of the events;

at the age of sixty-eight, it was his firm belief the integrity of the games was long gone, another victim of corporate greed. Too many events held at night, interrupting regular programs, and too many "spotlight" pieces on athletes, as far as he was concerned. All of it only for TV ratings. But it was still better than game shows or reality TV, and the ballgame was already over, so he'd fixed a beer and a ham sandwich and resigned himself to sitting through endless commentary from monotone announcers until he fell asleep.

Things were going just as he'd planned until something hit him in the chest, waking him from a doze during one of the swimming events.

"What the…?" Trano looked down at the object sitting in his lap. It was a figurine Marge had bought on their first trip to Germany, back in 1956. A figurine that had sat on the fireplace mantle since the day they'd brought it home.

The mantle that was all the way across the room.

Trano stood up, the figurine clutched in his hand.

Someone's in the house!

His wife was dead and his children all lived out of state, which meant there could only be one explanation: an intruder.

He ran through the possibilities as he hurried over to his gun cabinet. Since Marge's passing, he'd taken to keeping it unlocked—just in case.

Was it teenagers playing a prank? Or a thief with the mistaken idea that an old man would be easy prey?

Trano smiled as he slid a double-barreled shotgun out and loaded in two rounds of rock salt. It wouldn't kill, but it would hurt like a bastard. He'd used the gun not two weeks earlier; blasted away a couple of squirrels who'd started raiding the bird feeders he kept in the backyard. So he knew his aim was still spot on.

Flicking the safety off, he headed across the room toward the kitchen, wondering how long the intruder had been watching him. Fifteen minutes? Twenty?

Jesus. He could have killed me and stolen everything. The fact that the mysterious person had chosen to play a prank instead led him to believe it was just teenagers. Probably those idjit Olsen brothers from down the road, whacked out on dope as usual. It was for that reason he'd only chosen rock salt. Killing the neighbors wouldn't be the best idea, even though he'd be doing the world a favor by preventing them from breeding more idiots.

Maybe I can shoot them in the groin.

A quick glance at the kitchen showed it was empty. There were no places to hide in the small room. He was about to turn back when a slight movement caught his eye.

A large carving knife hovered in the air by the sink.

Trano had time to think *What the hell?* and then the knife turned into an arrow, shooting across the room and burying itself to the hilt in his chest. He opened his mouth to scream but the only sound that escaped him was the hissing of air leaking from his punctured lung. There was a moment of horribly intense pain, an agony so great his legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor. Then all feeling disappeared, leaving behind a gray fog that covered his vision and numbed both body and brain.

As the last seconds of his life ticked away, he thought he heard someone laughing.

"Guilt is a lot like rage, Alec. It can drive you crazy. Heck, it can kill you. It eats you up from the inside until there's nothing left but a shell. That's why I'm glad you're here."

Dr. Beth Tetler smiled at Alec, unaware that each word she spoke pierced his heart like a tiny blade coated in vinegar.

He nodded, hoping she couldn't see through him to the real cause of his guilt. He'd stopped seeing her while Casey was still in the hospital, convinced that nothing she said would ever lift the heavy tonnage of self-reproach off his back. But after Father Hayden's sermon, and his own reaction to it, he'd decided it was time to let the poison out, tell the truth about what had happened that day, and who better to confess to than a person bound by law to keep it a secret? It probably wouldn't change things with him and Casey, but maybe, just *maybe*, Dr. Tetler might have some advice as to how he could manage his guilt better until he worked up the courage to confess to his wife.

Except now that he'd settled into the black leather recliner, facing his shrink eye to eye, he found his nerve was deserting him faster than a rat fleeing a sinking ship.

And I'm the rat. Of course, he couldn't say that out loud. Instead, he found himself telling his usual story of being haunted by feelings that he could have—should have—done more.

"What more could you have done?" Dr. Tetler asked, her deep green eyes filled with compassion behind her trendy cat's eye glasses. "That's the question you have to ask yourself. If the answer is nothing, then you have no reason to feel guilty."

"So why do I?" Alec felt the truth cringing deep inside him, curling into the fetal position inside that little box he kept triple-locked and hidden in the back of a mental closet. He wished he could join it.

Tetler gave him a half smile that blended in with the lines on her face and neck until it almost disappeared.

"If I knew the answer to that, I'd be a millionaire. Guilt is a funny thing, Alec. It has the ability to take the truth and twist it around, mold it into things that seem right but aren't. It defies logic. Think about it. A man decides to take a different plane than the one he was scheduled for. The first plane goes down and everyone dies. So why does this man

suffer from survivor's guilt? He didn't cause the plane to go down. He didn't know anyone on the plane. He should be rejoicing that he lived, but instead he feels an irrational guilt for not dying."

Tetler pointed a pencil-thin finger at him.

"And that is you to a tee," she said. "What could you have done differently? Gone back in time and attacked the bear before it got to your camp? Or perhaps used your ability to see into the future and camped somewhere else? Or maybe just waited an hour to go get wood for the fire, waited until after dark so you could break a leg in the woods."

"I see your point." Alec made sure he sounded like he really believed her. "I need to think logically, rather than emotionally." He was parroting her own words from a previous session back to her, but she nodded emphatically.

"Yes! You must be like Mr. Spock from that space show. In this case, if you keep telling yourself there was nothing else you could do, eventually your subconscious will begin to believe it as well, and then the guilt will no longer control you."

The tiny clock on the doctor's desk dinged softly, indicating their time was up. Alec wondered how she timed things so well. He sighed and stood. Although he took care not to show it, he wished he hadn't come. It had been a waste, thanks mainly to his own cowardice.

Always the coward. There. Here. At home.

"Thanks, Doc. I'll try to do that."

"Yes, good." She walked him to the door and said goodbye. As he walked down the hallway, she called out to him.

"Remember. Just ask yourself, what more could I have done?"

He waved, fighting back a scream of frustration.

What more could I have done? Fuck you, you old bat. I could have not run away! If you knew the truth, you'd be telling me what a

piece of shit I am, not teaching me how to rid myself of guilt. Guilt that I deserve.

He continued berating himself all the way to his car, but then paused as he unlocked the door.

Teaching me how to rid myself of guilt.

Did it matter if the guilt was logical or illogical?

After all, could he have made a difference? He'd been twenty feet away from his wife and children when the bear attacked Casey. What chance would an unarmed man have had against a bear? Didn't everyone tell him he was lucky he hadn't been there, because he'd be dead too? Did the reason he wasn't there really matter?

Perhaps, in the end, it didn't matter what he'd done or not done—the end result would have been *worse* had he acted differently.

It wouldn't be just Nick and Sue who were dead. All four of them would have been killed, leaving Jennifer an orphan.

The question was, did he really believe that, and could he convince his subconscious of his new logic?

He had to try. For his sake, for his family's sake, he had to try.

There was nothing else I could do. There was nothing else I could do.

He slid behind the wheel, repeating his new mantra in his head as he started the car.

As he drove, he did his best to ignore his subconscious, which kept trying to have the last word.

You ran away and left them to die.

Had he known it was his last day on Earth, Police Chief Homer Watkins might have done things differently.

Then again, he might not have.

His favorite thing in all the world was fishing. He'd loved it since the first time his father had taken him, way back on his eighth birthday. He'd tried to instill that same love in his own two children, Abby and Ellie, and for a while it had seemed as if they'd take to it, too. But girls will be girls and all too soon they'd reached that age where they preferred to do girl things with their mother and their friends. Then, of course, they'd found men. Eventually both had gotten married and moved away, Abby to Las Vegas, where she and her good-for-nothing husband worked as blackjack dealers and lived in a crappy two-bedroom apartment, and Ellie to California, where she'd gotten divorced and moved in with her "friend" Serena, in a very nice one-bedroom apartment. Neither of them called home very often, partly because Homer objected to both their lifestyles, and partly because they'd both turned out to be rather selfish, concerned more with their own problems in life than the love of family.

So it was no real surprise Homer had chosen to go fishing on his day off. He could have visited his wife's grave, but lately he'd been finding excuses to avoid the cemetery. Not that he missed Helen any less; just that he'd begun thinking that after ten years in the grave perhaps she felt it would be good for him to not come every day.

In a way, he had Alec Winter to thank for that. Not long after that terrible accident in the woods, and the subsequent rescue of Casey Winter, he'd started contemplating his life and how he'd been in a funk, as the kids called it, ever since Helen had died. Looking back, those years seemed all gray and fuzzy, as if he'd been living in a fog, living in it so long that he'd forgotten it was there.

But the death of Winter's children, and the amazing tale of Alec's heroism and Casey's survival, had woken him from his daze. Made him realize in ways his wife's death never did that life is short, and you should try to be happy as much as possible.

So he'd made a conscious effort to stop thinking about how and where he'd gone wrong with his kids, and how lucky other families were, and how much it totally fucking sucked that his wife was dead,

and instead focused on what was good in his life. The good times he'd had with Helen. The fact that neither of his children were in jail, or dead, or druggies. The simple pleasures he could still enjoy despite getting on in years.

Like fishing.

Which was why when his day off came around, there'd been no thought of calling his kids, spending extra time at the station catching up on paperwork, or crying at his wife's grave.

The sun was shining, it wasn't that hot for August, and there was a nice section of river running right through the back end of his property where he could fish without worrying about anyone interrupting him.

So he'd gathered his pole and creel, packed a couple sandwiches and a thermos of coffee, and set off through the woods for a day of relaxation.

It was the silence that gave Homer his first clue that something wasn't right.

Stream and river fishing is serene sport, with real enthusiasts choosing their spots carefully to maximize the tranquility factor. Homer's regular place was a wide stretch of river with a short strip of sandy beach separating the water from the scrub forest that made up the back acreage of his property. No matter what the season, it was peaceful. But in summer it was also especially beautiful. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, creating a green dome through which zebra stripes of shadow and light patterned the sand where he faithfully placed his chair, so that he never got too hot or cold. It was the perfect spot as far as he was concerned, open enough so that the breezes off the river could reach him, secluded enough so that he could achieve his own state of personal nirvana.

However, it was never completely silent.

Once a person isn't talking, isn't listening to a radio, isn't bustling about, it's impossible not to notice that the woods are filled with

sounds. Insects buzzing and chirping. Birds singing single and multi-tone melodies. Leaves rustling as a breeze weaves its way through them. The tinkling notes of the water as it ripples around rocks. The occasional burping of a frog or the splashing of a jumping fish.

Small sounds, the kinds of sounds that quickly blend into the background, unnoticed as the sun warms the body and the mind drifts away in thought, or lack of it.

Unnoticed until they're gone.

Homer grew aware of the unnatural quiet when he opened his eyes to reach for a beer. His hand was halfway to the cooler when he stopped, trying to figure out what it was that didn't seem right.

In a silence broken only by the melodic sounds of the river, the only other thing he could hear was the ringing of his ears, that buzzing, cricket-y noise you normally only hear when you wake up late at night in an empty house.

Somethin' ain't right.

His instinctive reaction was to jump up from his chair and turn around, his eyes scanning the woods and his hand automatically dropping down to the pistol holstered at his waist. Ever since that bear attacked the Winter family, he'd never gone into the woods unarmed.

Nothing moved at the tree line, or as far back into the woods as he could see.

Homer stood perfectly still, decades of hunting and law enforcement training coming together, his body doing exactly what it was supposed to without any conscious thought on his part. He strained his ears, trying to catch any sounds that might indicate something was out there. A branch snapping. Brush rustling. A grunt or growl.

Nothing.

In his mind, he ran through the checklist of dangerous animals in the area. Black bear were pretty common, although they rarely bothered people.

Tell that to the Winters' children. But then that had been an aberration. The bear had been half-starved and in pain, thanks to an infected wound from a gunshot. No, more often than not bears preferred to go out of their way to avoid humans.

There were still some bobcats left, but they weren't large enough to send the whole forest into hiding. A mountain lion might do it, but it'd been decades since one had been seen in the area.

That left only one other possibility: a person.

Although anyone in the woods would've had to cut through Homer's property to get there, it wasn't unheard of. A few of the local fellows, trying to get a fat buck before hunting season started, wouldn't give a damn about No Trespassing signs. And they could be more dangerous than bear, with itchy trigger fingers and brains that had to work overtime just to form a sentence.

On the other hand, he knew how to take care of a few half-wit poachers. Unless they were completely drunk, they'd head for their trucks as soon as they knew he was there.

"Hey!" He let the echo of his shout die away before continuing. "This is Chief Watkins! If there's someone out there, you're on private property. Private property owned by a cop. You hear me? Either show yourselves or get the hell out of here!"

His words faded away, leaving only that strange silence. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that someone was watching him. You couldn't be a good cop without having a sort of sixth sense for danger, and for knowing when someone had their eyes on you. He felt their gaze, the impression of being stared at heavy in the atmosphere.

"Hey! You hear me? I know you're there!"

This time there was a noise in the aftermath of his shout. A giggle of laughter, so light and quiet it blended into the watery chime of the eddies in the river.

Tinkle-tee-hee-tinkle.

Homer frowned. It wasn't the sound he'd expect an adult to make, even if that person was playing games with him. It was too silly and self-indulgent.

Childlike.

The laughter came again, closer this time, and it sent shivers up his back. The innocence of it was oddly menacing, as if it was somehow too pure, too sweet. It brought a long-lost image to Homer's mind. He'd been eight years old and one of his classmates, a boy named Mark Sperry, had shoved a pin right into the big bubble in the throat of a frog he'd caught. Just to see what happened.

Mark's laughter had been full of innocence too, while he watched the frog's eyes pop clear out of its head.

Last I heard, Mark was doing hard time for rape.

His hand, which had strayed from his gun when he thought it might just be small children in the woods, returned to the comforting grip of the pistol.

Homer kept his eyes to the woods, the sensation of being watched growing stronger, the silence growing more intimidating. He waited for more laughter, hoping to get an idea of where the little bastards were hiding, but either they'd gotten control of themselves or they were trying to convince him they were gone.

He didn't believe it for a second.

Something splashed loudly in the river behind him, too loud to be a fish. *A stone thrown from the woods, most likely.* He prepared himself for what was probably coming next. The little fuckers planned on tossing rocks at him? Well, let them try. He pointed the gun at the sky and fired a single shot, the report echoing off the water and rocks before the forest swallowed it. A few birds took off from their hidden roosts, circled several times and then alighted again.

Then nothing.

Homer waited, a tiny smile curving the ends of his lips. Had he scared them off? Were they even now slinking back down a trail to the road? Or were they cowering behind a tree, afraid the big bad man with the gun was going to come looking for them? Either way, it didn't matter. He'd accomplished his goal of letting them know who was boss. Maybe they'd think twice next time before starting—

Sudden pain flared in the back of his leg and he almost fell onto the sand. He turned and saw a golf ball-sized rock rolling away.

"Son of a bitch."

The little bastards were on the other side of the river, too. They'd set him up. He waved the gun in the air.

"You want some of this? I'm a cop, dammit! Git your asses home before you get in real trouble!"

Frustration replaced his previous fear and the self-satisfaction that had followed it. He was pushing sixty-three. No way could he chase kids through the woods and hope to catch them. And he certainly couldn't shoot them. That'd be a PR nightmare. He'd lose his job, his pension, everything. Even if it was justified because he felt his life was in danger. Hell, he couldn't even call the station and have a few men sent out, since he never brought his cell phone with him when he fished.

Which left only one option.

Admit defeat and go home.

"What the hell. Day's ruined anyhow." He knew he'd never recapture the serenity of the morning. Might as well head back, fix a snack and wait for the ballgame to start.

He packed up his folding chair, rod and cooler and headed back down the trail toward his house. Something thumped on the beach just as he entered the woods but he ignored it. Let the little shits have their fun. Odds were good he'd catch them at something else sooner or later; kids like that usually ended up in the back of his car at some point.

He'd only been walking a minute or two when another stone crashed into the dead leaves off to one side of the trail. Homer felt his anger returning.

Damn punks are going to follow me all the way home? Who the hell do they think they are?

He slowed down a bit and stepped carefully, doing his best not to make any noise. His thought was to draw them closer so he could get a glimpse of their faces. Or maybe even catch one of them. It would probably mean taking a direct hit or two from a rock, but then he could add assaulting a police officer to the other charges he planned to drop on the bastards.

Sure enough, he'd only taken another step when a stone struck him right between the shoulder blades. He winced, not only from the pain but the dreaded anticipation of where the next one would hit. Back? Ass? Or maybe his head. That last one made him cringe a little more, because a head shot from even a small child could do some real damage.

Pain blossomed in his right thigh, and then again in his lower back as two stony missiles hit in rapid sequence.

"Screw this." Homer dropped his gear and ducked behind an old pine, then peeked around to see where the miniature snipers were.

Except there was nothing to see but trees.

The back of his head exploded in agony and he fell to his knees. He put a hand to the already sizeable lump and it came away bloody.

"Mother-*fuckers*!" Homer's voice rose to a shout as he stood up. A terrible rage filled him, red as the blood trickling down his neck, powerful enough to force any considerations of public opinion out of his head.

He pulled his gun, stepped onto the trail and fired four quick shots, two down each direction of the path.

"You wanna play, you fucks? C'mon and play! I'll blow your asses to kingdom come!"

More of the creepy giggling drifted through the still air. Homer went to one knee, gun held in both hands, as if he were facing off against an armed felon. His anger was still burning bright but some of the earlier fear was returning. There was something decidedly not right about the situation and it had him reconsidering whether it really was just some jerk-off kids stalking him.

A bug-shit crazy maniac could just as easily laugh like that. Just because we're a small town and there's never been any murders don't mean there can't be a first time.

He thought about high school and college kids shooting up their classrooms. That could happen anywhere, too. When you really considered it, the odds were greater that he was dealing with a lunatic than some kids.

More giggling. It seemed to come from his left and right at the same time.

Maybe a whole group of psychos. Hopped up on drugs. Or one of them cults, out to kill a cop and get some publicity.

The fear grew worse, growing over and around his anger like a vine strangling a tree.

Shit. I'm a fucking sitting duck out here.

Forgetting his fishing gear, Homer stood and slowly made his way down the trail toward his property, alternating between facing forward and walking backward. Sweat dripped down his neck in tiny rivulets, mixing with the blood from his scalp wound. His hand trembled in time with the rapid beating of his heart. He tried to take slow, easy breaths but his adrenaline was pumping too hard.

Ten minutes of careful walking brought him to the end of the woods and the beginning of his wide backyard. A sense of relief filled him, so strong his knees almost buckled from it. His house, only fifty

yards away now, was a beacon, a safe haven where he could finally take control of the situation again.

Homer increased his pace, power-walking through the yellow, sun-roasted grass, glancing back occasionally to make sure his hidden enemies weren't racing toward him.

He was thirty feet from his house and already picturing calling in the entire police force when a sudden barrage of stones came out of nowhere, tiny meteors that struck him all over. He fell to the ground with a cry, covering his head with his arms while rocks hit him with enough force to bruise skin and draw blood even through his clothing.

Something heavy pounded against his ankle and the *crack!* of breaking bone reached his ears, accompanied by a burst of stomach-turning agony. This time his shout was more of a scream. He risked a glance and saw a rock the size of a softball near his leg.

Terrified for his life, Homer scurried on his hands and knees for the house, ignoring the hard ground tearing through his clothes and the continued onslaught of deadly rocks raining down on him. All his thoughts centered on getting inside.

He made it to his back porch without any other serious injuries, and said a quick prayer of thanks as he grasped the wrought-iron railing and pulled himself up. Balancing on his one good foot and gritting his teeth against the pain, he reached for the door knob.

And then screamed again as a fist-sized rock smashed against his other hand, the one still on the railing.

This time the sound of bone being crushed was lost in the metallic ring of stone against metal. Cradling his mangled hand, he fell right through the screen door into the kitchen.

Several stones banged against the door and on the stairs, but Homer paid them no mind. Unaware of the tears running down his cheeks, he pulled himself across the linoleum to the tiny decorative phone stand in one corner. With his one functioning hand he dialed the station house, leaving bloody smears on the keypad in the process.

"Greene Police. How can I help you?" At that moment, the nasally voice of Mary Dennis, the day shift phone operator, was the most beautiful sound Homer had ever heard.

"Mary, it's Homer. I've got an emergency situation at my house. A bunch of teenagers bombing the place with rocks. Send every car, and an ambulance. They broke my goddamn foot and my hand!"

"Jesus, Chief! Right away. Hang in there."

Homer hung up the phone and levered himself to a standing position. With only one foot and one hand there wasn't much he could do, but by God he could at least watch the yard and try to get a positive ID on any of the little cocksuckers.

He had time for one moment of confusion when it seemed there was an eclipse going on outside, a perfect circle of black blotting out the sun.

Then the ten-pound rock came through the window, shattering glass and the bones of his face with equal ease. So painful were his injuries that he never even felt the shards that sank deep into his throat, cutting through flesh and blood vessels.

Homer's last thoughts weren't of his wife, or his kids, or his job. They were about the pain.

Then he died with a long, wet gasp.

Childish giggling filled the silence that followed, until the first police cars arrived.

For the second time in a week, a voice from his past ruined Alec's breakfast. This time it was Terrance Bell, a person whose very name set Alec's stomach churning.

"Is there a problem?" Alec asked, as soon as the insurance investigator identified himself.

A host of emotions sprang to life inside Alec, with rage, sorrow, disgust, and fear all fighting each other for dominance. A sickening case of déjà vu struck Alec as he relived his previous encounters with Bell, none of which had been pleasant. He considered the man a prissy, egotistical jerkoff who had about as much compassion as the average scorpion.

Rationally, he knew Bell wasn't actually to blame; it wouldn't have mattered who the insurance company sent to investigate Sue and Nick's deaths, Alec would have hated that person just as much. Bell had only done his job. But to Alec, and Casey as well, that job had been an insult. As if they'd somehow planned to have a bear attack their campsite and kill their children just so they could collect the meager life insurance policies they'd had on them. Policies Alec's parents had purchased, as gifts, something they'd done for all their grandchildren, the idea being that in twenty years the policies could be cashed in and used to pay off college loans or put toward a wedding.

Instead, they'd paid for two funerals.

It hadn't helped that the investigation only added fuel to the fire of Alec's guilt, causing him to react to every one of Bell's required questions as if they were overt accusations.

"I believe so, although not the kind you're probably thinking of," the nasally voice on the other end of the phone replied. "This has nothing to do with your children's case, and I'm not acting in an official capacity. But it does have something to do with the events of that day. Would it be possible for us to meet?"

Alec's stomach lurched and he fought down the urge to vomit. Something to do with the events of that day? Had Bell figured out the truth? What did he mean by he wasn't acting in an official capacity? Did he have some kind of blackmail planned?

Forcing a calmness he didn't feel into his voice, he asked, "Where are you? Did you want to meet for lunch?"

"Yes, lunch is fine," Bell said, sounding relieved. "I only live twenty minutes from you. Just tell me when and where."

After arranging to meet at a diner on the edge of town, Alec played back the call in his mind. Something odd was going on, something that had Bell… Well, it almost seemed the diminutive investigator had been frightened of something.

But what?

Alec tossed his half-eaten breakfast into the trash and grabbed a handful of antacids from the cabinet. He grimaced as he washed them down with the last of his coffee.

It looked like it was going to be one of *those* days.

After grabbing his briefcase and jacket, he headed off to the first of his two morning appointments.

Alec stared at Terrance Bell and wondered how quickly he could get away from him.

Bell's obvious insanity had made itself known within minutes of their sitting down at the table, but as he spoke, the depth of his delusions had grown to the point where Alec was beginning to fear for his own safety.

The insurance investigator paused to take a breath and Alec took the opportunity to speak.

"Um, seriously? You're trying to tell me that all three of those people were killed because they were somehow involved in the deaths of my children?"

"Yes." Bell nodded, his head bouncing up and down on his lollipop-stick neck. "On the surface it doesn't seem possible, I know. But in my business we're trained to look at facts objectively. Without emotion. And then to take those facts and create an explanation or hypothesis where they all fit together. In this case, we have three

deaths. What do they have in common? They all occurred in the same town. They were all people who were involved with saving the lives of you and your wife. They all occurred either on or soon after the one-year anniversary of your rescue. Therefore, it is logical to assume they have to be related to the events of that day in some manner."

"When you say it like that, it sounds like Casey or I should be a suspect in the murders," Alec said, hoping his facetious answer would drive some sense into Bell's insane theory.

Instead, Bell gave him a ghastly smile and nodded, his pale face bobbing on his pencil neck like a grotesque mushroom grown too heavy for its stalk.

"That's quite right. In fact, I'd imagine you *would* be a suspect if the people had wronged you instead of saving you. It would take a true crazy person to murder the people he owed his life to. I would also guess you have a pretty good alibi for yourself regarding the times of the murders. However, the fact that you are likely innocent doesn't mean someone else didn't want those people dead."

Alec had reached the end of his patience.

"Mr. Bell, I think it's you who's the crazy one." He got up to leave, his hand dipping into his pocket for some dollar bills to pay for his coffee.

"Wait!" Bell caught Alec's hand in his own spider-like fingers. "I'm not through. There's also the map."

"Map?" Alec retrieved his hand from Bell's weak grasp but didn't move away from the table.

"Look." Bell dug frantically into his briefcase and drew out a piece of paper that he placed on the table. From what Alec could tell, it was a printout from a Mapquest search. A series of red dots had been drawn on it, with red lines connecting the first four and then black dotted lines joining the first group to another group of two dots much farther down on the paper.

"All I see are green squares and red dots," Alec said. But inside he went a little cold. Something about the map was familiar…

"This point represents the approximate location of your campsite." Bell tapped the first red dot, then moved his finger along the red line, tapping each of the closely spaced points of red. "Here is where David Gregg's body was found. Here is Dr. Eddie Trano's house, in Greene. And here is Chief Watkins' house. Notice anything about the pattern?"

Despite his desire to leave, Alec sat down and took a closer look at the paper. Once he oriented the map so that north was at the top, he immediately saw what Bell was referring to.

"The line goes from north to south."

"Actually, it heads southeast from Catskill Park," Bell corrected. "And this point? Do you recognize it?" He tapped the final red dot.

"That's my house, isn't it?" Alec said, recognizing the shape of Rockland County near the bottom of the page.

"Yes. And the one just above it is mine. Whatever killed Gregg, Trano and Watkins is moving in a straight line towards us."

"Whatever". Not "whoever". The distinction wasn't lost on Alec. *More proof that this guy is nuttier than a peanut bar.*

Not that the whole thing wasn't more than a little spooky. Alec was willing to consider there was some kind of link between the three deaths. After all, they'd been in the same town. A crazy person, perhaps. Someone with a grudge against rescue personnel.

Maybe even Bell himself.

That idea sent a major shiver up Alec's back. After all, it was Bell who had decided to draw the line between the deaths upstate in Greene and his and Alec's houses. It would have been just as easy to extend the line north instead of south. Or west, if you considered the town of Greene as one big point and Catskill Park as another.

Alec decided it was time to make his exit.

"Well, you've given me a lot to think about, Mr. Bell," he said, getting up again and dropping his money on the table. "But I have to get back to work. Have a nice day."

"You don't believe me." Bell stood also, blocking Alec's departure. "Don't you get it? Our lives are in danger! Yours, mine, our families. Something's out there and it's coming for us. You can't ignore the evidence."

"Actually, I can and I will." Alec slid past the cadaverous-thin insurance inspector. "If you're so sure about this, take it to the police. But don't bother me again."

Alec headed for the exit, Bell's protests diminishing in volume behind him until the closing door cut them off for good.

Jesus, what a kook.

Still, the uneasy feeling in his stomach stayed with him while he drove to his next appointment. It wasn't until he got involved in negotiating his best sale of the month at a large medical practice that he finally forgot about his trepidations.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Alec was more than ready to go home, fix a drink, and celebrate the big bonus check he was going to get.

Ten days after the death of Homer Watkins, Alec made a last minute executive decision as he and Casey were getting ready for work.

"Call in sick today. We're taking Jennifer to the zoo."

"The what?" Casey's sleep-crusted eyes opened in shock.

"The zoo. You know, that big park filled with animals?"

"Very funny. Now stop being a jerk and tell me what's going on." Casey went to her closet and began laying out her clothes for the day, a pair of black slacks that matched her panties and bra.

"What's going on is that we haven't done anything fun as a family in ages, and they're saying today is one of the top ten days of the summer—clear, sunny and only eighty. What do you say? It's the middle of the week, so the place won't be crowded. Then we can grab lunch somewhere afterwards."

Halfway to the bathroom, Casey paused and Alec knew he almost had her convinced. He'd been worried his comment about family time might have the wrong effect, but she hadn't even flinched.

Not waiting for her answer, and hoping to force her hand, he stepped past her and pulled a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of his dresser.

"I'm going, and I'm taking Jennifer with me. Are you in, or are you gonna be a corporate drone today?"

Alec really hoped she'd say yes. He'd tried to remember if she'd said anything about being especially busy this week. She was the office manager at a company that manufactured hand tools and construction supplies, and her workload went up and down based on the time of year and whether or not the company was running any specials. If she was slow, her boss, Abe Fishburn, wouldn't have a problem with her calling in at the last minute.

For Alec, taking off simply meant logging into his corporate portal and clicking "paperwork" on his daily log. As a pharmaceutical sales rep, he basically set his own hours and days, since he only had to spend four days a month in the actual office, except for special meetings.

Casey chewed her lower lip, something she always did when she was having trouble making a decision. Alec already had his jeans and shirt on and was reaching for his sneakers when she relaxed into a smile.

"Oh, what the hell. Let's do it!"

For Alec, their first few hours at the zoo were better than he'd hoped they would be. Nothing they did was exceptional, but just being together, holding hands, laughing—there was a quality to it that he knew had been missing from their lives for too long.

For him, it was as if they'd travelled back in time, back to when Nick was still their only child. In those days, they'd had the whole world ahead of them and every day seemed better than the one before it. Sure, money was tighter then, but doing simple things together—like going to the zoo—had given them more joy than fancy dinners or Broadway shows or expensive vacations. Even after Sue came along, family had stayed the most important thing in their lives. Alec became a Little League coach and a Cub Scouts troop master just to have quality time with Nick. And when Sue got old enough to join the Brownies, Casey added assistant troop leader to her already long list of motherly duties.

And Cub Scouts and Brownies had led to camping, which led to…

Stop it. Don't go down that line of thinking. This is the beginning of a new life for everyone.

He turned to Casey, who was pushing Jennifer in the stroller.

"Hey, how about ice cream? It comes in plastic cups with animal faces on them."

By then the sun was baking them pretty well, and Casey gave him a grateful look.

"That sounds great. We'll wait over there." She pointed to a bench that was nicely shaded by a large tree.

"Be right back."

While he waited in line at the snack bar, Alec took out his phone and scrolled through his emails, highlighting work-related messages to read when they got home, and deleting the junk. In the process, he came across a couple of messages from one of his college buddies, who loved sending politically incorrect jokes and photos.

Chuckling at a picture of a midget trapped between the naked breasts of a six-hundred pound woman (*"I* thought *I dropped something at lunch!"* was the caption), it took him a second to notice there was a commotion going on around him.

Looking up, he saw people pointing, all of them with alarmed expressions. Several were commenting in loud voices.

"Look at that!"

"Oh, my God."

"Somebody help her!"

Turning, he saw a woman chasing a baby stroller down a path. For a moment he felt a surge of anger. What kind of parent let their kid's stroller roll away like that?

Then he recognized the pink T-shirt the woman was wearing.

Casey!

For the rest of his days, Alec never knew if he shouted her name out loud or if it was just in his head. All he remembered later was taking off after his wife and child and the world shrinking into a tunnel around him, where the only thing he could see was Casey chasing after Jennifer. How the stroller had gotten to such a speed on flat ground, how it was able to take the turns and stay on the path—hell, how it could roll away on its own at all!—none of that entered his mind at first. The only thing he focused on was trying to save them.

In the normal world, the worst that could happen would be the stroller tipping over or Casey falling down. Scrapes, cuts, maybe a broken bone or two. But something in his brain told him there was more going on than just a runaway stroller. It was still picking up speed, actually increasing the distance between it and Casey's outstretched arms.

Alec ran past a wooden sign and a sick feeling erupted in his stomach.

The stroller was headed for the black bear enclosure.

Impossible! his mind screamed. There was no way it could happen. The path took too many turns. But even as he thought it, the stroller banked hard to the left, rising up on its right wheels to take the sharp curve.

"No!" Casey's scream came back to him as if from miles away, stretched out and distorted like a train's horn speeding past.

Alec forced his legs to move faster, suddenly sure the stroller was going to make the remaining turns and take flight, sail right over the safety wall of the bear enclosure. He slammed into onlookers and bounced off without feeling the impact, startled shouts and harsh words nothing but white noise to his ears. He felt as if he were running a race that someone had fixed. He could see himself getting closer to Casey, but Jennifer's stroller continued to put more distance between them.

The stroller wheeled around the next turn like an Indy racer and Alec swore he heard Jennifer laughing at the top of her lungs. She'd never had any fear; she loved being tossed in the air, ran into water without a care for going under and approached all dogs with a smile. *"Doggie! Doggie!"* she'd say, ignoring all warnings to be careful around animals she didn't know.

And more than anything else, she loved to go fast, whether it was in her stroller, a shopping cart, or a ride at the amusement park.

Her laughter now in the face of death didn't surprise Alec one bit.

Someone grabbed his arm and he was startled to see it was Casey. With all his attention focused on Jennifer he hadn't noticed he'd caught up to his wife.

"Get…get…her!" she gasped, her face flushed and sweaty from running. Then he was past her, not even bothering to answer, saving all his oxygen for his already aching muscles. He thought he heard her shout *"Save my baby!"* but he couldn't be sure.

Jennifer's stroller completed the last curve in the path and somehow accelerated into the straightaway that led to the black bear enclosure. Alec put everything he had into moving his legs faster and

through watering eyes he saw that he'd actually gained a few feet on his daughter's out of control cart. Laughter floated back to him and the hairs on his neck stood up as he realized it wasn't Jennifer's.

Yet he recognized it all the same.

No! It can't be! It sounds like—

"Look! That stroller's gonna hit the wall!"

A stranger's voice brought Alec's attention back to the danger at hand. Jennifer's stroller was headed straight for the waist-high cement wall that surrounded the sunken enclosure housing the black bears. The wall was topped by a three-foot high iron fence that curved inward so that even if one of the bears managed the incredible feat of climbing a ten-foot smooth wall it still wouldn't be able to escape its pen.

That same wall represented both danger and rescue for Jennifer. If her stroller hit at full speed, it was bound to flip or break or crush in on itself like an accordion. And Jennifer, made of only flesh and bone, would suffer as a result. Alec pictured her arms or legs snapping, her head smashing onto the blacktop or into the wall, pieces of metal from the canopy or handles piercing her like spears.

However, the wall would also make it impossible for her to roll into the pen.

Alec saw with frightening clarity that the stroller wouldn't slow and he wouldn't reach it in time. There were only a few feet left before the inevitable collision and his only hope was that he could scoop her up fast and rush her to the nearest first aid station.

Time slowed to half speed as he sprinted the last few steps. Ahead of him, the carriage crashed into the wall at exactly the point he'd predicted. The back end rose up and Jennifer's body sailed out, her arms and legs waving in giddy fashion, an ecstatic smile on her face.

Alec came to a stop, although he didn't know it at the time, his body and thoughts immobilized by shock as he tried to comprehend the scene before him.

Never mind that Jennifer shouldn't have been ejected at all, that her seatbelt should have kept her in the stroller.

She was still rising upward like a leaf caught in a breeze.

Onlookers cried out and gasped as Jennifer floated up and up and up, following a flight vector that defied gravity. And although he never said a word to anyone later—not the police, not the press—it wasn't until she was over the top of the iron fence that she began to move forward and downward in a gradual arc. He saw it clear as day, his eyes following her descent into the jaws of death.

"*No!*" Something hard shoved him to one side. Casey sprinted past, practically a blur as she raced for the wall. People screamed at her to stop but she never paused, just leaped up onto the cement barrier and then jumped again, somehow managing to land on the curved bars.

And then she was gone.

Time froze for Alec. His body refused to move. He stared at the spot where Casey and Jennifer had disappeared, waiting for them to pop right back up, safe and laughing and not a scratch on them.

"Holy shit! That lady jumped into the bear den!"

That first exclamation started a cacophony of shouts and cries for help. It also broke Alec's paralysis. He sprinted to the wall and climbed up, kicking away the hands of people who tried to grab him. Unlike Casey he didn't jump onto the bars; instead, he seized hold of them and pulled himself up until he reached the curved summit.

Holding on as tight as he could, he tried to peer between the bars to catch sight of Casey, but the inward curve of the cement wall blocked his view. All he saw was the back end of a bear lumbering out of sight. Noises echoed up from below him, horrible gnashing sounds his brain refused to process. Then a different sound reached him.

The sound of a baby crying.

Alec looked to his left and nearly lost his grip.

Jennifer was hanging from a bar just three feet away, her pink jumper snagged on a bar that at some point in time had been bent so that it no longer curved down but stuck out at an angle. Her eyes were closed and her face was red from crying and wet with tears, but she looked safe and unhurt.

"Jen! Jennifer! It's Daddy!" Alec called to her as loud as he could but she didn't open her eyes, just kept bawling. Turning back to the crowd that had gathered, he cried out.

"Someone get help! My baby is caught on the fence! Hurry before she falls in!"

"I'm coming, sweetheart," he told Jennifer, although he couldn't tell if she heard him. It was something easier said than done. He had to back down the bars without falling between them, scuttle to his left, and then climb back up. By the time he reached her and stuck his arm through the bars to grasp her by her jumper, two men in security uniforms had already shown up and were clambering up beside him with some kind of safety hook attached to a rope.

"Move back," one of them said, but Alec refused to let go and retreat down to the wall until he was sure they had Jennifer firmly attached to the rope. Even then he felt like a helpless fool as he watched two strangers slide his daughter off her perch and pull her up to safety.

Only when he had a shrieking Jennifer clutched in his arms did he let his thoughts turn to Casey.

"My wife," he said over Jennifer's shoulder, aiming his words at the security guards. In the distance, the despondent wail of sirens became audible. "Please, tell me…"

The two men exchanged glances and Alec knew right then she was dead. He'd seen those looks on peoples' faces before, back when he led the rescue team to the campsite.

But they'd been wrong about Casey then. Maybe…

"She could still be alive. You have to go check."

The taller of the two guards, whose name tag read "Larson," pursed his lips before answering.

"I'm sorry, but…between the fall and…" He turned away, looked toward the enclosure. For the first time, Alec heard people shouting and banging things.

They're chasing the bears away from your dead wife's body.

"I don't understand," he said, even though he did. It was as if someone else was speaking through his body.

"They're usually pretty calm," the second guard said. "We keep them overfed, and they're lazy to begin with. But a fall like that, there was blood, and—"

"Shut yer mouth," Larson told his partner in a harsh whisper. The man did as he was told, but by then it was too late. The image had already formed in Alec's mind, his brain using the memories of the campsite to create a picture so awful it actually hurt to see.

Then everything mercifully disappeared, painted over in solid black.

Alec spent the next four days in the hospital, alternating between bouts of weeping and falling into a dreamless sleep that was almost coma-like. When he was awake, he refused to eat and only gave in and drank something when the pain in his throat prevented him from sleeping.

He ate something on the third day, but only after his doctors threatened to have him transferred to the psychiatric unit if he continued his hunger strike.

Returning home was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do; back when they'd lost Nick and Sue, he and Casey had been able to lean on each other, provide support and comfort. Now he had no one, and on top of that he had to pick Jennifer up from her friend's house and

explain that Mommy wasn't coming home, she'd gone to live with Nick and Sue in Heaven.

It took every ounce of will he had not to break down in front of her.

Only when he'd gotten Jen to sleep did he allow himself more tears, and even then it was downstairs so she wouldn't hear. He sat on the couch in the family room, a glass of scotch in one hand and Casey's picture in the other, quietly raging at the incredible absurdity that fate had made of his life.

Bears. Goddamned fucking bears! First my children and now Casey. It's like something out of the National fucking Enquirer, or a sick fucking joke.

He hadn't read any newspapers or watched television since waking up, but he could imagine the headlines in the Post and the other rags. *Real-Life Goldilocks Doesn't Survive Second Bear Attack*. *Zoo Bears Finish What Their Cousin Started*.

And then there'd be the jokes on late night TV and Howard Stern. *Why'd the bear cross the road? To eat one of the Winter kids! Say, when does a bear not hibernate in Winter? When it's too busy eating one of them!*

All of that was bad enough, but there would be worse to come. The looks from people when he went out in public. The solemn condolences while eyes expressed different thoughts altogether, thoughts they most assuredly voiced when he was out of earshot.

"Jesus, the guy's whole family was eaten by bears. How's that for weird?" "I heard his wife actually jumped in with the bears to save her kid. I don't know if I could do that."

And the final kicker: *"He must be feeling like shit. First he couldn't save his kids, and then he couldn't save his wife."*

Feeling like shit. That was putting it mildly. Nobody would ever know how goddamned awful he felt. He couldn't even put it into words, not out loud, not in his own head. There *were* no words. They'd

all been crushed under the thousand-ton weight of guilt and then beaten to pieces by the iron fists of remorse and self-reproach.

Because when it came down to it, everything was his fault.

He'd been the one to suggest the camping trip. *He'd* been the one to insist they go to the zoo.

And he'd been the one on both occasions who wasn't there when it mattered.

He'd run away the first time, leaving behind a wife who was badly injured and two children who were screaming for help. Sure, he'd overcome his fear and gone back, but by then it had been too late. Nick and Sue were dead, the bear gone, and the only witness to his shame was whatever God had sent the bear in the first place.

Then a year later he hadn't run fast enough. In fact, he'd just stood there while Casey gave up her life for her child. He could have stopped her. Could have pulled her down. Then they'd all still be together. But instead he'd simply watched like a statue while his wife threw her life away. And for what?

Nothing.

Alec's rage boiled over and he reared back to throw the picture across the room. At the last second he remembered Jennifer sleeping upstairs and he tried to stop his arm, but it was too late. The best he could do was change his aim, and the picture ended up bouncing harmlessly off the loveseat across from him.

Frustrated by the inability to release his pent-up anger and grief, he downed his scotch and reached for the bottle. Forgoing the glass, he tilted the bottle up and let the contents pour into his mouth. The alcohol carved a bittersweet track down his throat and merged painfully with the acids already percolating in his stomach. He swallowed six or seven times before he couldn't keep up and he coughed liquid fire into his nose.

His wrath temporarily bumped aside by the scotch-flavored lava in his nasal passages, he leaned back, intending to catch his breath before repeating the process.

Instead, he fell asleep.

And dreamed.

In his dreams, he was back at the zoo, where he and Jennifer's stroller were the only things moving. He raced past bystanders who were frozen in place, turned to living stone in the middle of whatever they'd been doing. Only their eyes followed his progress as he chased the stroller toward its inevitable crash site.

Just as it had in real life, the stroller hit the wall while he watched, helpless to stop it. Only this time he knew it was going to happen so he kept his eyes on Jen as she was ejected. Sure enough, she flew up into the air in the same impossible fashion as before. Only now it happened in slow motion, allowing Alec to see each detail.

Jen didn't fly out of the stroller as much as she rose up into the air, almost as if she were tied to invisible strings. Her mouth was open with laughter and her arms held out at her sides while she did her out-of-this-world trick. Then, at a height of almost ten feet off the ground, her body suddenly tilted forward and her trajectory changed, taking on an arc that should have landed her well into the bear enclosure.

Forcing his will on the dream, Alec froze her there and ran forward, climbed onto the wall and then up the bars to the spot where he'd first seen his daughter snagged on the errant iron bar.

Then he watched as Jen's descent started.

He gasped as once again she defied the laws of physics and gravity and her path brought her inward, back toward the bars.

One of which slowly bent upward to catch her.

Dream-Alec turned toward the immobile onlookers.

"Did you see that? Did anyone see that? The bar wasn't bent before! I remember! I remember!"

The crowd remained still, their eyes all facing him, their mouths unmoving.

So why did he hear people giggling with joy?

That laughter. I heard it before. When I was chasing the stroller.

But that wasn't the first time he'd heard it. It was familiar, as familiar as his own.

It was—

The transition from dream state to awake happened so smoothly Alec didn't even realize it at first. The childish laughter was still everywhere and nowhere, coming at him from all directions.

"Nicky? Sue?" Hearing his own voice alerted him to the fact he was no longer asleep.

Was he that far gone that he was hearing the laughter of his dead children? And if so, why did it sound mean? Evil? Nick and Sue had possessed the sweetest laughter in the world.

"Something's not right." His words brought more titters from the specters haunting his mind.

The bar on the fence.

In his dream, he'd seen it bending upward as Jennifer fell toward it. Before that, it had been shaped in a downward curve like its neighbors.

Before that.

"Jesus Christ on a popsicle stick."

He remembered now. He'd taken pictures of the bears earlier, before… And while he'd been doing that, he'd aimed the camera to the side to capture some birds perched on the bars.

And none of the bars had been curved.

No. I must be remembering wrong. Or that fucked up dream has made me crazy.

Alec stood up and then had to catch himself on the arm of the couch as he swayed dangerously to one side, the alcohol in his blood still messing with his equilibrium. Once he steadied himself, he made his way into the kitchen, where he remembered seeing the camera earlier. He had no recollection of putting it in his pocket at the zoo or taking it out when he got home from the hospital. But it was still there.

He turned it on and quickly scrolled through the stored pictures, his hands shaking from more than just the scotch.

There!

The same as he remembered it. The sideways shot had captured the curved bars in a long row, stretching off into infinity, the way he'd intended it when he took the picture.

Not a single bar was out of place.

Is that what my dream was telling me? That between the time when I took that picture and when Jennifer's carriage hit the wall, somehow a solid iron bar had gotten bent into just the right shape to catch my daughter, who just happened to be floating on an invisible magic carpet at the time?

Alec dropped the camera onto the counter. He had to be going insane. Those things didn't happen, not in the real world.

And little girls don't change direction in midair, either.

But he'd seen that happen, hadn't he? He didn't need a dream to remind him.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Someone giggled behind him.

Turning so fast the room continued to spin after he stopped, Alec looked around. That definitely hadn't been his imagination. Someone was in the house with them.

Bell.

The name popped into Alec's head and instantly he knew what was going on. The goddamned crazy insurance investigator was behind it. He'd read about Casey's death and decided to torment Alec into believing ghosts were real.

He had four days to come here and set up his toys. Hide things throughout the house. And not just sound effects. He's probably watching me right now, getting his fucking jollies.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered just how far Bell would take his sick plan—had he even doctored the photo in the camera? Whispered subliminal messages to a sleeping victim?

"*Mother—*" Alec caught himself and finished the rest in a soft voice so he wouldn't wake Jen. "—fucker!" He started toward the living room, intending to tear it apart looking for bugs or transmitters or whatever, and then he stopped as a new thought came to him.

Why give Bell the satisfaction of seeing him upset? It would drive the bastard crazy if Alec did nothing but relax and act as if everything were fine.

So instead of searching for concealed devices, he poured another drink and flicked on the TV. Casey's death still weighed heavily on him, a grief compounded by his own guilt and loneliness. His intention was to drink himself into a stupor and let the TV's drone push him back into the land of sleep. Tomorrow he'd have the added torment of a hangover to go with his appointment at the funeral home, but he'd get through it, take care of everything, comfort Jen some more.

And then tomorrow night he would drown his sorrows all over again.

The TV automatically came on to the regional news station, and Alec was ready to change the channel, afraid he'd see a story about his own family, when a scrolling headline caught his attention.

Coming up next—investigations continue into the death of a man with ties to the recent victim of the bear mauling at the…

"What the fuck?" Alec put down his scotch and the remote.

Ties to Casey? Who—?

A nasty feeling came to life in his stomach, churning up the scotch and the frozen pizza he'd had for dinner.

"Whatever killed Gregg, Trano, and Watkins is moving in a straight line toward us."

Bell's words, spoken at the diner. He'd believed something was killing everyone who'd been involved in the events following the bear attack at the campsite.

But it had to be nonsense. There couldn't—

"Yesterday afternoon, the body of Terrance Bell, a claims investigator with—"

The news story continued, but Alec missed most of it. He just stared at Bell's face plastered on the screen. Scattered words reached him, enough of them getting through his shock for him to figure out what happened.

Knives…

Thirty times…

Casey Winter…

Files found…

Bell is dead. Murdered. Stabbed to death in his own kitchen. They found his files on my family. The other deaths.

"No. It's not possible. He was…"

What? Crazy? So why couldn't someone else be crazy? Someone who wanted everyone involved with the Winter family dead?

The churning in Alec's stomach grew worse and he had to run for the kitchen sink, made it there just before the scotch and pizza came bursting up and out in a burning, vile explosion. Vomit splattered the insides of the sink and peppered Alec's cheeks. He dry heaved a few more times and then wiped his mouth. After washing the stinking mess down the drain, he poured himself a glass of water and leaned against

the counter to drink it, purposely not thinking of anything, not looking at anything.

Gradually his brain started working again, and he realized his blank gaze was focused on the pile of mail sitting on the kitchen table. It had been on the porch when he came home, and he'd dumped it on the table out of habit. It was Casey who'd always sorted it…

Mixed in with the white envelopes and penny-saver flyers was something that didn't belong. A brown manila envelope, large and fat.

Seeing it brought the whirlpool in Alec's stomach back to life. That envelope was *wrong*; he could feel it from across the room.

His body was moving toward it before he comprehended what he was doing. He felt as if someone were controlling his body as he put his water down and picked the envelope up.

It was addressed to him.

The return label said *T. Bell*.

Oh, God.

His fingers shook as he tore it open and dumped the contents on the table. Pictures clipped from newspapers. Printouts of autopsy reports. A copy of the map he'd shown Alec, with dates next to each of the murder points.

And a note.

It landed atop all the other items. Alec was able to read it even as his hand reached for it.

Dear Alec,

Please call me. Things have been happening lately. I've heard voices. Laughter. But there is no one here except me. I sent my family away. I know what it is that's after us. It's your children, Alec. Nickolas and Susan. My research into brutal deaths shows many instances of angry, vengeful spirits who

A sudden wind whipped the papers up and away from his hand. They flew across the room and swirled around in a circle, moving faster and faster until a miniature tornado of paper hovered in the arch between the kitchen and dining room. A crackling, whining sound filled the air. Occasionally a piece of paper would dart out and then return to the supernatural cyclone. After one such emergence, Alec felt a stinging sensation on his arm and looked down to find a thin red line running from his shoulder to his wrist. Tiny droplets of blood were already beading up.

The sight of the long paper cut made him step back several paces, fear overcoming astonishment.

"Something's out there and it's coming for us."

Bell's words returned, only this time they didn't seem so crazy. In fact, they made perfect sense. The murders. The laughter. The strange—no, *impossible*—occurrences.

Alec's stomach clenched and his bowels threatened to let loose as it all became crystal clear to him. Bell was right.

Nick and Sue. They've come back and they want me dead for what I did. And along the way they killed everyone who unwittingly helped me keep my dirty secret.

It was almost too ghastly to think about but once the thought was in his head it took on the heavy weight of certainty. It was dreadful, appalling, horrific—but there was no other explanation.

"Nicky! Susan! I know you can hear me. Show yourselves."

He didn't feel the least bit foolish shouting at the empty room, especially when the miniature tornado died in an explosion of papers and all-too-familiar giggling echoed through the room.

All of Alec's pent-up guilt and self-hatred burst up from the dark places inside him where he'd kept it locked away. His children had come back from the dead for revenge all because he hadn't tried to save them, had gone on to live his life while the true memory of their deaths stayed a secret.

All those people dead because of me. If I hadn't run away, or maybe even if I'd just told the truth…

"I'm sorry!" Alec held out his hands. "Do you hear me? I'm sorry! I should have done something but I ran away. I was scared. I didn't tell anyone because I was afraid your mother would leave me."

The room stayed silent, and Alec wondered if his children were contemplating his death or letting him live. It had felt good to finally admit what he'd done, to burst the infected boil on his conscience and let the poisonous truth out.

He wished he'd done it months ago, a year ago.

A salt shaker rose up from the table and launched itself at him. It struck him in the chest before he could even try to block it. The pepper shaker followed. Other objects on the table—a napkin holder, a plastic bottle of vitamins, a pencil—levitated and then aimed themselves at him. Alec covered his eyes and so didn't see them take flight, but he felt their attack. The bottle and napkin holder bounced off his arms. A sharp pain blossomed in his right forearm and he cried out. Lowering his arms, he saw the pencil lodged an inch deep in the flesh just below his elbow. He pulled it out and then had to duck when a vase sailed across the room and shattered against the wall next to him.

This is how the others died. Stabbed and beaten by the objects in their own houses. So why had they killed Casey—their own mother!—*differently?*

The answer came to him right away.

The bears. It was a message for me.

But why kill Casey? She hadn't done anything—she'd already been unconscious when the bear went after Nick and Sue, had no idea her husband had been a lying coward.

It didn't matter anymore. Alec watched as a drawer opened and a large barbeque fork emerged. He was ready to die. It was what he deserved. He spread his arms wide and closed his eyes.

"Go ahead. Kill me. I should have died—"

Upstairs, Jennifer started crying.

Jen! Who will take care of her if I'm dead?

"Save my baby!"

Those had been the last words Casey ever said to him. Not "I love you", not "Goodbye". Even though she'd known leaping into the bear enclosure was pretty much a death sentence. There'd been no thoughts in her head other than saving her baby.

How can I do less?

Alec dove to the floor and rolled to one side. A second later there was a loud *thunk* as the fork struck the cabinet where he'd been standing, the impact followed by a metallic diving board sound as the metal arm vibrated in place.

The manic laughter cut off as Alec crawled toward the hall. He imagined the ghosts of his children weren't pleased their prey had escaped.

He had no plan in mind, just a frantic desire to save himself and Jen. The one thing he knew was he couldn't take time to sort through ideas or create an escape strategy. The ghosts could see everything he did, follow effortlessly. His only chance lay in keeping them off-balance, surprising them over and over again like he'd done in the kitchen.

Getting to his feet, he ran for the stairs, dodging from side to side so that he was harder to target. Objects collided with the steps and banister and walls all around him, forks, knives, cups, and even a book. More than a few struck him glancing blows but he took no direct hits until he reached the top of the staircase and turned toward Jen's room.

In that moment where he had to pause or fall down, fire blossomed in his ankle and he had to grab the banister to keep from tumbling back down the stairs. Without looking, he reached down and pulled a steak knife free. Hot, sticky liquid was already plastering his

sock to his skin as he limped-ran down the hall. Inside Jen's room he slammed the door shut, knowing it wouldn't offer any protection but the habit was too ingrained. Jen was still screaming but he figured there'd be time to comfort her later, when they were safe. He reached down to pick her up and her cries intensified.

In the soft glow from her nightlight, he saw why.

Someone had carved a stick figure bear in her chest. The symbol was clearly recognizable despite the blood smeared all over.

"You goddamn bastards!" Alec shouted. "She's just an innocent baby! She wasn't even there!"

He took Jen's blankets and wrapped them around her, hoping they would offer some protection against whatever the insane spirits of her siblings had in mind for her. He stood up and then had to duck and pull her close to his body as the contents of her shelves flew at him from all directions. Toys, hair brushes, combs, plastic mirrors, books, and plastic jewelry struck him with enough force to leave purple and red welts on his arms, back, and neck. Hunched over Jen to protect her, he crossed the small room and yanked the door open.

Something struck his arms and chest with the force of a freight train, knocking him back into Jennifer's room where he crashed into a dresser. Reality disappeared as his head cracked against hard wood and he fell to the floor. For a moment there was nothing except whirling, colored lights and a sound like water flowing over stones. Then his senses returned and he saw Jen lying motionless and silent a few feet away.

"No." The one word was all that squeezed out before his throat closed up. He reached out and pulled her toward him.

Twin lines of blood ran from her nose over her upper lip. A similar rivulet cascaded from inside her ear, flowing out and over the edge like a miniature stream emerging from a cave. When he lifted her up, her head flopped back until it touched between her shoulder blades and her chin pointed at the ceiling.

Alec lowered her still form to his lap, his own body cold and empty. It was over. They'd taken everything from him, left him with only a worthless life and some remaining shreds of sanity, both of which he was ready to give up.

He rose and placed Jen's lifeless body in her bed. He had no tears, placed no final kiss on her forehead. There was no point. He'd failed her like he'd failed the rest of his family. Failed to protect them from the bear. Failed to protect them from Nick's and Sue's ghosts. He imagined they were all watching and hating him, cheering Nick and Sue on.

He went into his bedroom. Laughter followed him but he ignored it. Everything was exactly as he and Casey had left it when they'd gone to the zoo. The scent of her perfume still lingered in the air. Her work clothes were still crumpled on the bed where she'd tossed them.

Alec paused. Something was scrawled on the mirror, the letters written in red lipstick.

Come join us, my love. We're all here waiting for you.

It was Casey's handwriting.

All at once hope surged to life in Alec's chest.

His family was waiting for him.

Was that what all this had been about? Nick and Sue simply wanting to bring their family to the other side so they could all be together again? Two lonely children, half-mad with grief, doing the only thing in their power to put an end to their isolation? Acting not out of anger, but love?

A smile—the first one since the zoo—stretched Alec's lips. He was going to see his family again. It didn't matter if he had to die to do it. There was nothing left on Earth for him anyhow.

He went to the bed and lay down, his hands holding Casey's shirt and his eyes facing the ceiling, where a double handful of gleaming knives hovered in the air.

Still smiling, he closed his eyes.

"Take me."

The pain was more horrendous than anything he'd ever felt.

And then it was gone, taking with it all light and sound.

Alec opened his eyes to a gray world. There was no up or down, no ground or skies. Only an endless gray. He knew at once he'd passed on from his old life to whatever comes after, and he felt no fear, only joy.

His family was waiting!

"Casey? Where are you? Nicky? Sue? Jen?"

The words echoed in his consciousness but he had no way of knowing if they went any farther. He had no form that he could see, no mouth, no ears. He just *was*.

Am I a ghost?

"No, Father, not in this place."

Alec turned his non-existent body at the sound of Nick's voice, unsurprised that his thoughts were audible. Why not? He was in Heaven, or at least his version of it. A shape appeared, formless lumps and bumps that rapidly transformed into the outlines of Nick's face. Alec's heart surged at the thought of spending eternity in the arms of his loved ones.

"Nicky! You're here! Where is everyone else?"

The head moved back and forth and Nick's lips curled up in a weird grin that sent a twinge of cold fear through Alec.

"I'm here. Susie's here. Everybody else is just plain old dead."

As Nick spoke, his face transformed again. Alec recognized the new shape before it finished.

A bear.

He spun himself around with the intention of getting as far away from his son as possible.

Another bear stood before him, a gray shape that somehow he recognized as Susan.

“Hello, Father.”

Pain exploded in his back as razor-sharp claws carved through his incorporeal form. He cried out and raised invisible arms to defend himself. More claws raked his flesh and something that felt like a spike-filled vise clamped on to his leg with excruciating force before ripping away. He shouted Casey’s name over the sounds of insane laughter.

Claws and teeth attacked his arms, his legs, his chest, and his neck, each assault as agonizing as the last. Alec found himself praying for death, and then a terrible thought came to him through the pain.

He was already dead.

And his eternity was just beginning.

LEGACY

Although this one came out in 2014, I actually wrote it several years prior and then had nowhere to sell it. Novellas weren't popular, and Lovecraftian fiction was a very hard and tiny market to break into. Then Lovecraft and his monsters became popular again, and the ebook revolution made novellas viable again, and LEGACY found a home. And while I've done Lovecraftian stories before and since, this one is probably the most overt of all of them, with the monsters coming out in the open instead of just hiding in the shadows.

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 the closest she'd come to a beach was spending the day at Summit Lake. 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. We never got around to touching, but 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 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.

CULT OF THE BLACK JAGUAR

I've always been a big fan of the 1930s-style pulp action stories, those literary predecessors to movies such as the Indiana Jones series, African Queen, and Tomb Raider. Even before I knew what pulp stories were, I was cutting my teeth as a kid on The Adventures of Tintin whenever I could find the books in comics stores. *Cult of the Black Jaguar* started as just a short story, which I hoped to submit to a modern pulp fiction contest. Instead, it kept growing and I turned it into a novella.

Although it has some supernatural aspects, this one is definitely more adventure than horror.

Ethan Foster smiled as a tortured, undulating wail shattered the relative stillness of the sultry jungle night. On the other side of the fire, Elton Harrison's cup fell from his hands, spilling hot coffee onto his boots.

"Bloody hell! What was that?" Harrison stared into the darkness, his eyes wide.

"Jaguar." Hector Veracruz nonchalantly tossed another branch into the crackling campfire.

"Jaguar? It sounded like someone being murdered." Harrison mopped a thin, shaking hand ineffectively at his pant cuffs.

"*Balam*," whispered Popi from the smaller fire he and his brother, Luz, had made for themselves off to one side of the main group. Ethan wasn't used to having porters sit separately on his expeditions, but he figured it was their choice if they wanted to be anti-social.

"Eh? What?" asked Harrison.

Ethan, who'd been humming the latest song by Glenn Miller, put down the long-barreled, pearl-handled Colt .45 he'd been cleaning and wiped his long fingers on the front of his pants, leaving streaks of oil that quickly blended into the myriad stains on the fabric.

"*Balam* is Mayan for jaguar," he informed the expedition's diminutive physician. Lighting one of the foul-smelling black cheroots he preferred to cigarettes, Ethan continued his explanation, the cigar bobbing between his lips as he spoke.

"The Mayans revered the jaguar the way the Egyptians worshipped the sun, or that big dog-headed thing that guarded their temples."

"Anubis."

At the sound of Dr. Jennifer Pascal's voice, Ethan paused so he could watch her emerge from the tent she was sharing with her father. His body instantly responded to her presence, the same way it always did when she was near.

As the only woman on the team of eight for the months-long expedition, it was inevitable that all eyes would follow her every move in camp, but even if they'd been in the middle of Manhattan, Jenny Pascal would command the interest of every man around her. Like a glowing light calling to love-starved moths, she couldn't help drawing attention to herself.

Completely unaware of the effect her presence had on the rest of the party, she reached back with both hands and untied her hair from its usual ponytail. Long, curling waves of flaming red cascaded around her thin shoulders like molten lava flowing down a hillside. In the fire's light, each strand glowed as bright as the embers themselves.

Ethan felt his heart come to life, his pulse speeding up and thumping like war drums in his veins. During the day, her field vest and pack had done an adequate job of hiding her womanly assets, but now her plain t-shirt and hiking shorts accentuated her pinup-girl figure to its fullest.

The tall, sandy-haired guide smiled to himself as he noticed the way the other men, even the native help, stared at her. Most guides believed bringing a woman on an expedition was bad luck. And he had seen instances where that was the case; a woman could be a dangerous distraction in the field. As far as Ethan was concerned, though, if you had to have a woman in your camp, you could do a lot worse than Jenny Pascal, with her long, toned legs and innocent, Midwestern girl-next-door looks.

Of course, if the girl next door happened to be a double-Ph.D. and an expert on ancient Central American civilizations, like Jenny, then you were doubly lucky.

Taking a seat by the fire, Jenny continued her impromptu lecture. "The Mayans held great reverence for the jaguar. Jaguar spirits, called *balamobs*, guarded the people from harm."

The tent flaps opened again and Dr. Heathcliff Pascal, senior archeologist of the expedition and one of the world's greatest

authorities on paleo-Indian civilizations, emerged to join his daughter. The gray-haired historian might as well have been invisible for all the notice anyone paid him. Jenny Pascal's beauty held peoples' attention with its own mystical gravitational field, allowing nothing to escape. Only Jenny paid him any mind, scooting over so he could take a seat next to her.

The weeks-long hike through the jungles of Guatemala had left Heathcliff tired and weak. But Jenny had a way of energizing him. She always had. His eyes took on a hint of their old energy as he sat down.

"The jaguar played a very important role in the city we're searching for." Jenny's normally soft voice became stronger, more animated, whenever she spoke about the subject most dear to her heart. Her eyes, green as summer grass, reflected the red flames as if they were windows to the burning passion inside her.

Unfortunately, Ethan reminded himself, that passion was for history.

"The cult of the Black Jaguar began in this area around five hundred A.D., and *Ah Puch*, the City of the Dead, remained as its capital throughout its entire reign."

"Quite right, my dear," said the elder Pascal. He removed the battered straw hat he habitually wore in the field, a gift from Ethan many years and many expeditions ago, and fanned himself. Sweat stains created dark swaths under his arms and across his back, but he gave no indication of discomfort.

"And this Ah Puch is where we're supposed to find the Temple of Blood?" Harrison asked.

"Yes. For the Cult of the Black Jaguar, the *Temple de Sangre* was the focal point for their most sacred religious ceremonies. Including," Heathcliff added, "their blood sacrifices, which continued until the Spaniards wiped them out hundreds of years ago."

"Ah, yes. Cutting out the hearts and whatnot. Good thing that's done with."

Hector directed an angry glare at the doctor.

"Do not be so sure, Señor Harrison. The people of my village still fear the Temple de Sangre."

"Surely you don't believe that superstitious muck?" Harrison shook his head, a condescending smile spreading under his pencil-thin mustache.

"I do not disbelieve, Dr. Harrison. There are many tales of the *Balamob*, the Jaguar God. Tales of great cities hidden in the jungle, where the priests and priestesses are able to turn into jaguars. Places," he said, his dark eyes matching his serious tone, "where curious men and women disappear forever."

"Hmph." Harrison sipped at his cup, which Ethan suspected held more than just coffee. Not that it mattered. As long as the doctor could shoulder his pack in the morning and keep up, he could drink whatever he wanted. "Well, I for one…"

Another ululating scream sounded from the depths of the jungle, cutting short the latest in Harrison's unending string of pompous remarks. In the humid, dense air and near-impenetrable tropical forest, it was impossible to tell which direction the wail originated from.

"*Balamob!*" Luz, a short, thin local with coal-black hair and eyes, made a queer motion with his hands, almost like a Christian sign of the cross. Popi, who looked so much like his brother they could have passed for twins, swiftly repeated the gesture.

Ethan rose to his feet, gun in hand, as a third high-pitched cry, this one much closer, filled the air. Veracruz stood up also.

"What's wrong, Ethan? I didn't think jaguars would attack the camp." Heathcliff Pascal closed the notebook he'd been writing in.

"That wasn't a jaguar," Ethan said in a curt voice. He peered into darkness, wishing the presence of the others didn't limit his options for ensuring their safety. If it was just him and Heathcliff…

"Then what…oh!" Jenny Pascal's hand flew to her mouth. "Mr. Amos is still out there!"

Ethan nodded. "Hector, come with me. The rest of you stay here."

Veracruz was still reaching for his rifle when they heard a loud noise, as if something heavy moved within the ropey tangle of vines and trees surrounding the camp, just past the light thrown by the fires.

Ethan swung around, pistol out and aimed towards the sound, finger ready on the trigger, just in time to see Rory Amos, clothes torn and sweat-soaked blond hair plastered wildly across his head, burst from the trees.

"It's coming! Right behind me!"

Ethan Foster grabbed Rory Amos's arm just before the other man collapsed to the ground.

"Rory! What's going on? Who's coming?" Ethan held tight to his assistant, nearly pulling him into an embrace to keep the shaking man on his feet.

Sweat and spittle flew from Amos's lips as he gasped out his words. "I don't know. Something's out there. Something big. I couldn't see it clearly, but it's fast. Some kind of animal. Pacing me." He bent over, fighting to draw air into his oxygen-starved lungs.

A deep, gut-wrenching howl shook the night and scattered birds from their roosts. The clatter of wings and the raucous cries of startled jungle denizens added to the confusion.

"*Balamob!*" Popi pointed into the blackness.

For one brief moment, firelight reflected on ghostly yellow-green eyes. Then they were gone.

"Not a god, but a jaguar for sure," Ethan said.

Gun raised and ready, he advanced towards the place where they'd seen the animal, only to find his way blocked by Jenny Pascal, her fists on her hips and her cheeks flushed with anger. She stared up at him with a defiant glare.

"Ethan Foster! You can't possibly be thinking about shooting some poor animal?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow at the woman he'd known since the day she was born.

"*Doctor* Pascal, you better believe I'm thinking about it. Your father hired me to get you through the jungle safely, and I'm—"

He stopped speaking and threw himself onto her, knocking the young professor to the ground a split-second before a giant black form speared through the space where they'd been standing.

Ethan rolled halfway off her and fired his Colt just as the jungle cat landed. His first shot caught the animal in the meaty part of one back leg. With an ear-piercing shriek, the ferocious beast tumbled awkwardly onto its side, rolled over, and then got to its feet. A low, raspy snarl came from its throat as it prepared to leap once more.

Ethan rose to one knee and took careful aim. His pistol roared again and the enormous feline crumpled to the ground, a gaping hole at the base of its neck. It shuddered once before exhaling a final, long breath.

The smell of hot, fresh blood teased Ethan's nose in waves of copper and death. His belly growled in reaction.

Hands clutched his arm and two soft mounds of womanly flesh pressed against his back, distracting him from a dangerous path. Jenny's scent, a combination of sweat, woman, and shampoo, wafted over his shoulder and pushed aside the odors of the dead beast.

"You saved my life," she whispered into his ear. Her breath caressed the flesh of his neck and made the tiny hairs there stand on end.

Ethan turned his head and found himself staring directly into large, emerald eyes that were partly closed. The barest hint of a smile tilted up the corners of her full, pink lips.

He leaned in for the kiss that was due him, a kiss years in the making, his body already responding to hers.

"Jenny, come see this. Ethan has shot a melanistic jaguar. A magnificent beast, well over one hundred kilograms."

"Oh! We must get pictures!" The gentle pressure of Jenny's hand on Ethan's broad chest grew firmer and then disappeared as she pushed away from him and hurried to her father's side.

Damn Heathcliff Pascal for bringing his daughter!

Ethan clenched his jaw and stayed on his knees for moment, getting control of his emotions, before rising to his feet.

This is why you don't have women on expeditions.

Jenny caught the movement, gave him a distracted smile before returning to her inspection of the carcass.

"No doubt this is where the legends of the jaguar cult originated."

"Quite so," Heathcliff replied.

With a sigh, Ethan removed two bullets from his vest pocket. He was chambering them into the revolver when Hector Veracruz sidled up to him.

"We should leave now. Before something else attacks." The guide's coal-black eyes darted back and forth, scanning the jungle.

Ethan shook his head. "It's too late. We can't travel in the dark. We'll post guards and break camp at first light. Besides, a jaguar attack is a rare occurrence."

"The legends say different," Veracruz said.

"Yes, I've heard the stories of the *Gente de Jaguar,* the people of the jaguar who live deep in the jungle." Ethan checked the gun once more and then flipped the cylinder closed.

"Do not forget what else the legends say, Mr. Foster. About the high priests and priestesses who turn themselves into jaguars and protect Ah Puch."

"We've got similar tales back home." Ethan pointed his gun's seven-inch barrel at the cat and gave a short laugh. "I guess a high priest is no match for a forty-five."

"Do not be so sure." Veracruz moved off, still restless and alert.

"What was that about?" Rory Amos asked as he joined Foster.

"Hector's superstitions are showing." Ethan's steel-blue eyes stared past the shorter man, watching for the slightest movement in the darkness. "But we should still be on guard. I'll take first watch with Popi and Luz. You and Hector will have second watch."

"What about Harrison? We could split the watch three ways if we include him."

"Harrison?" Ethan let loose a derisive snort. "I'd sooner trust the Pascals with guns than that pompous ass."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Jenny could probably hold her own, but her father? He'd be lucky if he didn't shoot off his own foot."

Ethan tilted his head towards the bearded professor, busy taking notes as he examined the dead jaguar. "Don't be too sure, Rory. I've been on a lot of expeditions with Heathcliff. We've had some hair-raising times together over the years."

"Really? I can't see him as the adventurous type."

Ethan smiled, a small, wistful grin. "He wasn't always an old man like this. I remember once, back in twenty-three, we ran into some trouble in Egypt while we were excavating an unknown pyramid. Ended up surrounded by a group of desert bandits who wanted our supplies and our lives, and not necessarily in that order. Heathcliff took out three of them with his rifle and then started a stampede of camels to hide our escape."

Amos frowned in confusion. "Twenty-three? That would have made you, what, thirteen?"

"What? No. I meant I was twenty-three when it happened. Thirty-three was the year." Ethan slid his Colt back into the worn leather

holster under his left arm, cursing himself for his slip of the tongue. Sometimes keeping secrets was harder than the most grueling hike.

"C'mon, let's get everyone into their tents for the night."

Ethan had the team up and the camp broken before the first hint of dawn lightened the sky.

"How much farther to Ah Puch?" he asked Veracruz, as everyone shouldered their packs.

The wiry native, who'd been sullen and uncommunicative since the jaguar attack, squinted in concentration. "We are very close. Before nightfall for sure."

"Hear that, folks? Tonight we dine in the lost city."

"After what happened last night I thought you would want to go back."

"Go back? Not a chance. Get your men ready. I want to be on the trail in ten."

Veracruz gave him a curt nod and pulled Popi and Luz aside. He spoke to them sternly in their native tongue, a rapid mixture of Spanish and Mayan of which Ethan only caught a few words. The two porters grabbed rifles and machetes and made their way swiftly into the jungle.

"Where are they going?"

"I have sent them ahead to clear the path for us and look for signs of jaguars," Veracruz said. "They will meet us at Ah Puch."

"Sounds like an excellent idea." Harrison let his pack slide from his narrow shoulders and lit up a cigarette. "Let's give them a chance to cut some of the bloody plant life away. We'll make much better time."

Ethan started to object, until he noticed the way Heathcliff Pascal's face was already turning an alarming shade of red just from lifting his backpack.

"All right, we'll wait an hour before bugging out." He set his own pack down and pulled a cheroot from his breast pocket. Trailing ghostly streams of odiferous smoke behind him, he casually made his way over to Heathcliff's side.

"How are you feeling, old man?" Ethan gave him a smile to take the sting out of his comment.

"I've been better." Pascal mopped at his face with a handkerchief already soaking wet with perspiration and stained the same black as the jungle soil.

The professor's statement caught Ethan by surprise.

"I've never heard you admit to not feeling well. Not even that time you came down with malaria in the Congo."

Pascal sighed. "It's the heat," he said, shifting the handkerchief to his neck.

Ethan shook his head. "Don't give me that. You've spent more than half your life in jungles and deserts. Trekked for miles in conditions a lot worse than this."

Heathcliff looked across camp, where Jenny was busy writing in her field notebook, her eyes squinted comically as she concentrated on her work, oblivious to the cloud of bloodsucking insects surrounding her.

"Don't say anything to her, Ethan. But it's my heart. The medicine's not working anymore. I'm afraid this is my final journey. When we get home, I'll be relegated to a teaching position."

"What?" The professor's words stabbed Ethan's heart. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Heathcliff grinned at him, and for a moment he looked like a jolly caricature of Saint Nick, with his red face and white beard. All he needed to complete the image were the round glasses, which Ethan knew were tucked into one of his many pockets.

"And have you talk me out of my last big adventure? Not a chance."

"There are alternatives to the medicine."

Ethan's words, and the unspoken request behind them, drew the same response they always did, a shake of the professor's head and a rueful smile.

"No, my old friend. I won't be taking that road. One life is enough. But I thank you for the offer."

Ethan forced a smile in return, even though his heart felt gripped by steel-cold grief.

"Stubborn to the end. Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut. On one condition," he added, holding up a finger. "You let me carry some of you gear in my pack."

"Agreed."

Ethan watched as the old man got up and joined his daughter. Jenny's face beamed with happiness, the way it always did whenever she and her father got to work together.

Ethan let out a slow breath. He wondered if she brought the same fervor to the bedroom as she did to her work.

Stop dreaming, he told himself. *To her you'll always just be an uncle, or a friend. And that's the way it should be.*

He stubbed out his cigar, grinding it into the ground with his boot until only shreds remained.

Much like his heart felt.

Heathcliff Pascal stumbled again on the rough trail. He barely managed to keep his balance by grabbing Ethan's shoulder with a shaky, liver-spotted hand.

"Thank you," he gasped, as Ethan steadied him. His face was red and blotchy. Rivulets of sweat gouged deep tracks as they carved their way through the accumulation of dirt and dead insects on his neck.

With the revelation of the professor's health condition still fresh in his mind, Ethan decided to call a rest stop, even though they'd only been walking for two hours since lunch.

"Okay, everyone, ten-minute break before we finish the last leg to the city."

Even with a trail cut for them by Popi and Luz, the expedition team had found the going tough. Hidden roots waited to trip the unwary foot, and hanging vegetation clutched at faces and arms. Thorns and razor-sharp leaves nicked and cut, drawing drops of blood that in turn attracted even more flies and mosquitoes than usual. Veracruz fared a little better than the others thanks to his smaller stature, and Ethan's years of experience helped him avoid the majority of botanical obstacles. But Heathcliff, Harrison, and Jenny were gasping for air as they slid out of their packs and sat down.

"Christ, how much further is this lost city?" Rory Amos took a long drink from his canteen and then splashed some water on his handkerchief and placed it over his head to cool himself. He'd been chaperoning Elton Harrison, who'd kept up a running litany of complaints about the hike, the country and the Mayans in general for not living closer to civilization.

"The Mayans typically maintained large territories," Jenny said, wiping her face and neck with a blue bandana. Sweat soaked her tan shirt, molding it to her body in a manner that left nothing to the imagination. Her flushed cheeks, together with the damp locks of flaming copper hair that hung down across her forehead, provided Ethan with a vivid picture of how she would look under more pleasant—but no less exhausting—circumstances.

He forced himself to glance away as his lust rose again. Even then, the image stayed with him. He remembered the feel of her the

previous night, with only two thin layers of cotton separating their flesh.

A hacking cough brought his attention back from his unwanted carnal thoughts.

"Are you all right, Father?" Jenny patted Heathcliff's back.

"Just tired and hot. I'll be better once we reach Ah Puch."

"Well, then, let's not sit here on our bums wasting time. The sooner we reach this fabled city of yours the sooner we can set up a proper camp and rest our feet." Harrison's legs bowed a little as he shouldered his pack, but he managed to stay upright.

"It is not much farther," Veracruz said. He pointed down the trail and started walking, not bothering to see if anyone followed. His surly, brooding mood had not improved during the long trek, and Ethan found himself wondering why the man would work as a guide if he hated the jungle so much.

With a shrug, Ethan slid his pack onto his shoulders before helping the Jenny and Heathcliff don theirs.

"Onward, ho."

The smile Jenny flashed at him kept him from thinking about the oppressive tropical heat for a good ten minutes.

Half an hour later, Veracruz pushed back a final curtain of hanging branches and stepped aside.

"Ah Puch."

"Good Lord," whispered Heathcliff.

The City of the Dead lived up to its name.

Two stone pillars, carved with intricate reliefs of animal figures, human skulls, and demonic faces, marked the entrance to Ah Puch. A

snarling jaguar head, fashioned from solid obsidian, sat atop each pillar. Red-jeweled eyes sparkled ferociously in the rising sun.

A broad road, its ancient stone paving blocks overgrown with grasses and vines, stretched forward in front of the expedition team, extending the entire length of the long-lost city. Temples and other buildings rose into the air on both sides of the primitive avenue, some of the massive structures surprisingly intact, others nothing but mossy remains.

Centuries of weather and abandonment had taken their toll on the miracles of prehistoric construction. Crumbling walls spilled stones into the semi-clear areas between the buildings, and the jungle vegetation had re-assumed control of the city, encroaching from all sides and overgrowing what had once been grassy campuses and open fields. Creeping vines and roots crawled across everything, doing their best to obscure the ornate pictographs of birds, serpents, humans, and jaguars that decorated all the walls and pillars.

Smaller buildings, little more than rectangular mounds of green after centuries of abandonment, were visible to the left and right, set back from the myriad narrow pathways and side streets.

At the far end of a wide central plaza, a massive pyramid towered over the ancient city. Easily a hundred feet high, it dwarfed the other structures, which in their eroded, broken state appeared to be bowing in worship. Each side of the triangular-shaped edifice was a tall, narrow staircase. Three hundred sixty-five steps per side, one for each day of the year. The encroaching vines and undergrowth only reached halfway up the sides, giving the edifice the look of a snow-capped mountain. Unlike the ruins around it, the pyramid showed no signs of deterioration.

“Unbelievable,” Jenny Pascal said in an awed voice, as they passed between the pillars and entered the long-lost, mythical city. “That pyramid has to be the Temple de Sangre. Father, you were right!”

"*We* were right, my dear. I couldn't have done any of this without you. Without any of you," he added, extending his arms to acknowledge the entire party.

"Congratulations, Heathcliff. Once again you've proved the world wrong. Ah Puch really does exist." Ethan clapped a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"How come nobody's ever come to this place before?" Rory Amos asked as the two anthropologists began photographing the carvings on a nearby wall. He and Ethan helped them by clearing away some of the clinging vegetation. "I mean, a city this size ought to be visible from the air."

"Not many planes fly over this part of the world," Ethan replied. "Besides, it would just blend in with the rest of the jungle. You'd have to be flying low and looking hard in order to make out the buildings."

"Still, that temple sticks out like a sore thumb."

Ethan shrugged. "Maybe no one else had the courage or determination to try to reach it."

"Or perhaps those foolish enough to venture into the jungles of the Ah Puch before you ended their lives as sacrifices for the Gods," Veracruz said from nearby. He stood next to a square, single-story building. Detailed reliefs of human skulls covered the outside walls.

"That should be the Ossuary," Jenny said, examining the structure. "The place where the Mayans housed the bones of their dead."

"Bloody morbid thinking," Harrison commented, taking off his glasses and polishing them with his shirt. "Let's hope the local gods don't like to eat foreigners."

"Oh, but they do, Señor Harrison."

Before anyone could comment on his remark, Veracruz pulled out a large pistol and aimed it at them. "Drop your weapons, please."

Ethan took two quick steps forward, but stopped when the muzzle of the gun swung towards him.

“Mr. Veracruz! What is the meaning of this?” Heathcliff Pascal stood up and glared at the native guide. If the sight of the gun frightened him, he didn’t show it.

“My people are the last guardians of Ah Puch. Your blood will feed our Priestess and bring our city back to life.”

He fired a shot into the ground near Ethan’s feet. The report echoed from building to building before the jungle swallowed it. “Now, drop your weapons or I will be forced to kill one of you.”

Ethan clenched his teeth until his jaw ached but he did as the man asked, tossing his custom Colt and military knife to the ground. Rory Amos, eyes flashing with the same anger Ethan was feeling, complied as well. He placed his short-barreled shotgun on the ground and kicked it towards Veracruz. His blade went next to Ethan’s.

Veracruz smiled, his narrow eyes and thin mustache turning the gesture into a sardonic grimace.

“Into the Ossuary, please. You will remain there until it is time to feed your bodies to the Jaguar gods.”

“I don’t think so!” Ethan dove forward and seized the guide’s wrist, aiming the gun up in the air at the same time. He brought his free hand around in hard haymaker, his fist connecting hard with the point of the traitor’s chin.

Veracruz stumbled backwards, dragging the larger man with him. Ethan had a moment to curse his bad luck to be fighting in the daylight, and then the two of them were rolling on the hard, dusty ground, fighting for control of the pistol.

Ethan landed another punch, this time to the midsection. Hector’s breath sailed out in a large gasp and Ethan was able to wrest the gun away. He placed the barrel against Veracruz’s head.

“I don’t know what your game is, Hector, but it’s over.”

Veracruz coughed as he attempted to fill his lungs with air. “Yes, it is, Señor Foster. You and your people will not leave here alive, no matter what you do to me. Your blood will give the Priestess the strength to bring the Gente de Jaguar back to life.”

Ethan hesitated, torn between pulling the trigger or just tying the man up, but before he could decide, the opportunity slipped from his hands.

A sharp pain in his shoulder made him turn around. Popi stood just inside the entrance to the Ossuary, a long blowgun in his hands. Ethan’s suddenly numb fingers relinquished their hold on the gun. His legs collapsed under him.

Ambush, he had time to think, as the bright Guatemalan daylight turned gray. *Stupid! I forgot about Popi and Luz.* He tried to stand but his muscles refused to obey. Distant sounds of fighting and shouting registered on his fading consciousness.

Then everything went black and silent.

Ethan. Ethan.

Someone was calling for him in the darkness. Where are you? he shouted, but there was no sound to the words.

Ethan!

He turned, but didn’t, because he had no body. The thing he kept caged up inside him, the animal part of him, howled and shrieked, begging to be set free. Ethan told it to go, but it remained trapped, as lost and immobile as he was.

This isn’t right. It’s dark. Dark means night. Only daylight could—

Ethan!

Closer now, that voice. I know it. I—

"Ethan, wake up. Can you hear me?"

Cool wetness on his forehead accompanied the familiar voice. Ethan Foster opened his eyes. Rory Amos's round face hovered above him, its high forehead creased with worry. Behind him, tiny windows let in just enough light to turn darkness to dusk within the tomblike oven of the Ossuary.

Still daylight. That explains it.

Ethan attempted to raise his head but the movement sent everything spinning in rapid circles. He closed his eyes and groaned as nausea gripped his stomach.

"He's coming out of it," Rory's voice moved away. Another took its place.

"Mr. Foster. Drink some of this juice. It will help you feel better." He knew those nasal tones.

"Harrison?" Even to his own ears, his voice was barely more than a croaking whisper.

"Right the first time, old sport. Now drink. Doctor's orders."

A shadow fell across him and warm liquid dribbled into his mouth. Sour-sweet fruit juice of some kind. Not what he needed. His already churning stomach protested the insult. He doubled over, spitting the nectar onto the ground. Dry heaves and cramps racked his body for several minutes afterwards.

After the episode passed, taking with it the worst of his symptoms, he was able to sit up and open his eyes. His hand moved to his shoulder.

"If you're looking for the dart that did you in, don't bother, I already removed it," Harrison said.

Ethan held up a shaky arm and Amos grabbed it, helping him to his feet. "Good to have you back, boss. You've been out cold for a while."

"It feels like I just came off a two-week bender." Ethan rubbed his forehead while he waited for the world to stop doing lazy circles around him. "Jesus, what the hell did they shoot me with?"

Harrison thrust the wooden cup of juice at him again, but Ethan pushed it away. Even the smell was nauseating.

"Some kind of local toxin, probably a curare derivative," the English doctor said. "Lucky for you they want us alive. Some of those Indian poisons can kill a man in under a minute. Veracruz left the juice, said it would wash out the poison. He also left our canteens."

"Is everyone else all right?" Ethan glanced around the stone-walled room and took a quick headcount. Their party was all there.

Most importantly, Jenny was there, sitting beside her father. Both of them looked exhausted. Jenny started to rise, but Ethan motioned for her to stay with Heathcliff.

"Bruised and sore, but no broken bones." Amos shrugged. "There was a bit of a tussle after you went down. Luz and Popi were hiding in buildings to either side of us. A classic trap. We put up a good fight, but in the end the professor told us to surrender."

The younger man's tones indicated his distaste with the decision.

"Better to be prisoners than dead." Heathcliff reclined against one ancient wall. Jenny patted his hand and held a canteen at the ready.

"You made the right decision," Ethan agreed. He looked down at his wrist, but his watch was gone. Peering out of the small, square windows lining the walls he saw the sun still had a ways to go before it set. "It looks like late afternoon, maybe four or five o'clock. What've you been up to while I was out?"

"Cooling our heels and conserving our strength, mostly." Amos waved his hand at the room. "They took everything we had; belts, watches, pocket knives. And our packs, of course."

"What about the door?"

"It won't budge. They've got it braced from the outside. And the windows are too small for even Jenny or Harrison to fit through."

Amos scuffed his boot against the dry earth. "Sorry, boss. I wish I had better news."

"Not your fault, Rory. There was no way to know Hector and his men were crazy. We'll just have to be ready for any opportunity to escape."

He turned and faced the others, cleared his throat to get their attention. "I don't intend for—" He stopped at the sound of voices from outside. A moment later the door opened, filling the dim quarters with golden, late afternoon sunlight.

Ethan's long-barreled Colt held out in front of him, Veracruz entered the prison. Popi and Luz followed close behind, rifles at the ready.

Veracruz pointed at Jenny. "It is time to prepare for the ceremony. You will accompany us to the temple, where you will be cleansed before the sacrifice. The rest of you will stay here until your blood is needed."

"No!" Ethan lunged at Popi. Two punches to the stomach doubled the man over and knocked the gun from his hands, but the guide surprised Ethan by drawing a thin, obsidian-bladed knife and slashing across Ethan's midsection. The stone blade, sharp as German steel, sliced through Ethan's field vest and flayed open the flesh along his ribs.

Ethan cried out in agony and fell backwards, hands over the bloody gash. He tried to get up, but a heavy boot caught him in the chest, knocking the wind from him. Arrows of pain shot outwards from the knife wound.

Ethan caught glimpses of feet and fists as the expedition team once more exchanged blows with the natives. Even Harrison seemed to be putting up a fight.

"Father!" Jenny's voice rose above the general din. Veracruz had her by one arm and was dragging her away from Heathcliff's side. The white-haired historian lay on the ground, gasping for air.

"Enough! Stop or the girl dies!" Hector had his gun to her head.

"You're going to kill us anyway." Ethan spat out the words through clenched teeth.

"Then perhaps I will merely wound her." He moved the gun down to her stomach. "She can spend her last hours in agony, because of you."

"No." Ethan couldn't risk something happening to Jenny. They'd have to find another way to stop whatever madness Hector had planned. He held up a hand.

"All right. Everybody stop."

Popi and Luz pushed Amos against the far wall next to Elton Harrison, who sported a bloody nose.

Hector passed Jenny over to his men and then trained his gun on the other expedition members. Jenny struggled violently to free herself until Luz slapped her across the face. Ethan wanted to shout as her eyes went glassy and she slumped forward in their grasp, but the pain in his midsection prevented him from taking a deep enough breath. A laughing Popi tore her khaki shirt open, exposing her bra and bare midriff. He pulled the shirt down to her wrists and bound them behind her back with it.

Ethan felt the blood rush to his face as the two men hauled Jenny towards the door. Her copper hair was mussed and dirty, and streaks of gritty soil showed on her chest and back. The delicate material of her bra did little to hide her bare flesh, and Popi made sure his hands groped her as he pulled her along. Ethan dug his fingers into the hard-packed earth. Despite her condition—or perhaps because of it—Jenny had a wild beauty about her, and he feared what would happen to her once Hector's men got her alone somewhere.

"Enjoy your last hours, my friends." Veracruz smiled at them. "Soon the setting sun will call our Priestess from her slumber."

The door slammed shut, and the heavy sound of wood-on-wood indicated the brace had been set as well.

"Damn you, Veracruz!" Ethan pounded a fist against the ground, ignoring the throbbing across his ribcage. His body craved one of his cheroots, and darker things as well. His hands wanted only to be around Hector's neck.

"Boss, you okay?" Amos knelt down beside him, tried to pull Foster's hand from his wound.

"I'm fine," Ethan said, turning away and forcing his body to sit up. It took a greater effort than he expected, but he didn't stop. He knew he only had to deal with the pain until nightfall.

"Then you better take a look at Professor Pascal. He's in pretty bad shape."

Concern for Heathcliff spurred Ethan to push himself to his feet and stagger across the chamber.

"He's not breathing well," Harrison said.

Ethan winced as he crouched down next to his old friend. The professor's bearded face seemed to have aged years over the past few hours. His normally ruddy complexion had gone pale. Sickly dark smudges stained the flesh under his eyes, and his lips had a bluish tint to them. It alarmed Ethan that despite the intense heat in the Ossuary, the professor was no longer sweating.

The sound of Pascal's breathing reminded Ethan of a fat man trying to climb a long set of stairs. It wasn't a sound he'd ever heard Heathcliff Pascal make, not even after the longest of grueling jungle hikes.

"Heathcliff, can you hear me?" Ethan patted one of the professor's cheeks.

Blue eyes, uncharacteristically dull and faded, opened. “Ethan, my boy. They have Jenny. I tried to stop them…” Pascal paused to draw in a shaky breath. A tear rolled down his ashen cheek. “I tried…but I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get her back. In the meantime, you rest. You’ll need your strength later. Can you tell me where you’re hurt?”

Ashen lips turned up at the corners, a ghost of the historian’s normally ebullient smile. “Not my bones, Ethan. It’s my heart. They took my pack with my medicine. All this excitement…” He paused again. Ethan interrupted him before he could continue.

“I understand. Sit still. I’ll get you something to drink. It will make you feel better.”

Ethan patted the man on the arm. Holding back a groan, he stood up and motioned for Harrison to give the professor a cup of juice. Grim thoughts circled like buzzards in his head as he watched the professor sip carefully at the sweet liquid.

My only friend in the world is dying. And I’m helpless to stop it.

He’d served as mission planner, senior guide, and security guard for more of Heathcliff Pascal’s excursions than he could count. Ever since the professor had found him in Italy, locked in an underground tomb and facing an eternity-long slide into insanity. From that moment on, they’d been inseparable.

South America, Mexico, Egypt. Even Mongolia, where they’d run across one of Roy Chapman Andrews’ fossil-hunting expeditions. They’d spent a wild three days excavating the bones of prehistoric animals, all the while keeping a wary eye out for the bands of marauders rumored to be roaming the area.

Now, after more than thirty years together, the great explorer was in danger of losing his life because the crazy last members of an ancient cult had stolen his medicine. Ethan silently cursed the Gods who thought it entertaining to bring people together only to tear them apart again.

"We have to get his pack," he told Amos. "He won't last long without his pills."

"Forget about me. Save Jenny." The professor's voice was little more than a choking whisper.

Jenny. If you don't get out of this, you'll lose them both.

"We will. Nobody's dying, not today."

Ethan stared out one of the tiny windows. The Temple de Sangre rose above the other buildings, a monument to blood and death.

Ethan refused to picture Jenny laid out on the altar at the top, her life draining out onto the stones.

"I'll save you. I promise," he whispered.

Ethan did his best to use the time until sunset to their advantage. He moved from window to window, memorizing as much of the city's layout as he could. He went over different escape options with Rory Amos and Elton Harrison. And he made periodic checks on Heathcliff Pascal's condition.

The native remedy seemed to have revived the old man somewhat. His breathing was no longer as labored, and he'd even managed to sit up on his own. But his face still remained drained of color, and his skin had gone cold and clammy. By unspoken agreement, all three men were letting Pascal have their shares of water and juice.

The minutes dragged on in the oven-like temperature of their prison. Eventually, however, the light reaching them through the windows began to change. First darker yellow, then orange, then blood-red. Tropical sunsets passed quickly, and as soon as he noticed the lengthening shadows, Ethan roused the others.

When the three natives came for them, Ethan had everyone on their feet and waiting. His plan was to rush their enemy at the door. His

wound wasn't healed yet, but it had stopped bleeding, which was the best he could hope for under the circumstances.

The long, cold barrel of a shotgun stopped Ethan before he could take a single step. Veracruz sneered at them.

"You think I am stupid, Señor Foster?" He motioned with the gun. "Please come outside. One of you at a time. No tricks. You can meet the Priestess on your own two feet," he smiled, "or we can drag you to her on bloody stumps."

Ethan glanced back at Amos. "Do as he says." He stepped through the door, arms raised. Luz and Popi stood outside, both armed with pistols. Ethan's hopes sank further. Attempting an escape at that point would be pointless; they'd all end up dead. Their only hope now would be if one or more of the guards got distracted on the march towards the temple.

With the coming of night, Ah Puch took on an entirely different atmosphere, no longer an abandoned city but a supernatural metropolis filled with the ghosts of dead priests and their rabid cult of followers. Pots of flaming oil lined the wide main avenue, creating shadows that danced and threatened the procession of outsiders. In the jungle, jaguars howled and wailed as the men marched towards their appointment with death.

Towering above everything, the Temple de Sangre stood sentinel over its evil domain. Torches blazed around the base of the temple and up the stairs. More flickered at the top of the pyramid, where a square stone chamber with wide windows held the sacrificial altar. Incenses of various types filled the air with pungent odors that masked the smells of rotting plant life and wet soil emanating from the jungle.

The dark, starry skies and sputtering torchlight brought the ruins to life. Ethan had no trouble picturing how it must have looked hundreds of years in the past, when thousands of men and women would have stood around their foul temple, praying to the Priests and

Priestesses as innocent lives were cut short just to appease their abominable gods.

As they walked, Heathcliff Pascal stumbled and Elton Harrison put an arm around him to help keep him upright. Seeing the movement, Popi rush forward and separated them.

"The man is bloody sick, you ignorant savage!" Harrison spat.

Veracruz spoke something in the Mayan tongue and Popi backed away. "He is ill?" Veracruz asked Ethan.

"His heart. He needs his medicine. In his pack. Just one pill—"

"No." Veracruz cut him off. "You are all going to die tonight. What is the point in taking medicine first?"

"You're a real bastard, Hector. I'm going to enjoy killing you." Ethan wished he could be as sure as he sounded. It would be difficult—no, impossible—to do what needed doing without revealing the secret he and Heathcliff had kept for so long.

"Shut up and keep walking!" Veracruz shoved Ethan forward.

Ethan had expected Veracruz to lead them to the top of the pyramid. Instead, the procession halted at the base of the temple. A chorus of yowling jaguar cries rose up from thick tropical forest surrounding Ah Puch.

"Behold, the High Priestess comes."

Hector pointed to the top of the temple and his men raised their gazes to the pyramid's peak. Ethan followed suit, stunned by the revelation that the natives weren't crazy, that someone still occupied the temple and was leading them in the ancient ways.

A figure emerged from the altar chamber and began to descend the stairs. As it drew closer, details became visible to Ethan. A woman, cloaked in a long, flowing cape made from black jaguar hide. The beast's head was intact and sat atop the Priestess's own like a crown.

She took each step with regal precision, her lithe legs never slowing or faltering, her bare feet never slipping or missing a step.

Ethan had climbed other temples, knew how the steep, narrow stairs could cramp even the strongest of calf muscles. Clearly the Priestess kept herself strong.

But for who?

The Priestess stopped at the bottom of the pyramid, twenty feet from the prisoners. Long, slender arms emerged from under the cape and lifted the animal-head hood back and away.

Revealing one of the most beautiful women Ethan had ever seen in his life.

The Priestess, who looked no more than eighteen, curled one finger in a slow, languid gesture. Immediately, Popi sprang forward to slide the ebony fur from her shoulders. He bowed and stepped to the side.

Ethan's breath caught in his lungs as he realized she wore almost nothing under the robe.

Long, raven-black hair fell in a straight line down to her waist. It flowed in a midnight waterfall over her naked shoulders, chest, and waist. The effect was at once exciting and chaste, as it covered her while at the same time offering tantalizing glimpses of forbidden flesh.

An ornate skirt-like garment, fashioned from spun gold and decorated with precious stones, went from her waist to just above her knees. The honey-yellow color of the jewels matched the woman's eyes exactly.

The haughty expression on her full lips bespoke of generations of aristocratic lineage, as did her perfect posture and icy demeanor. Seeing her, Ethan knew it wouldn't matter if she stood in front of an ancient temple or a modern skyscraper. In any time, in any place, there could be no mistaking her for anything but royalty.

The dark angel's slender, scantily clad body would normally have been the focus of Ethan's thoughts, but it was her eyes that drew his attention.

Elliptical pupils sat within the almond-shaped, amber orbs. As alien as they were in her human face, they were somehow familiar to him. Then he remembered where he'd seen eyes like that before.

On the jaguar he'd killed the previous night.

The Priestess cast her disdainful gaze towards the prisoners. With a slight motion of one hand, she motioned them forward. Hector and Luz gave them no chance to object, prodding the captives with their rifles.

"I am Ix Chel, Moon Priestess and living body of the Balamob. You have intruded on our lands and angered the Gods." Her surprisingly powerful voice echoed from the surrounding buildings. In contrast to her graceful beauty, her words came out harsh and low, almost a growl.

Ethan cleared his throat, momentarily at a loss for something to say. When no one else spoke, he said the first thing that came to him. "You speak our language well."

"I speak many tongues, as befits a Priestess. For one hundred years I have ruled Ah Puch. I have learned much in that time."

"You rule an empty city?" Ethan allowed himself a trace of mockery. If he could anger her enough to make her approach him…

The Priestess raised one regal eyebrow, as if she knew exactly what game he was trying to play.

"My duty is to the Gente de Jaguar. Since the night I became queen, I have gathered my strength so that one day I can return them to their glory, to rule this land as my people once did. Now that power is within my grasp. With one last sacrifice, I will bring forth my priests and priestesses, and Ah Puch will live again!"

Heathcliff called out in a weak voice. "What about my daughter?"

Ix Chel stared at Pascal for a long moment before speaking. "You are the historian. I can see you possess a great mind, housed in a weak body. Death already summons you."

She smiled, a wide grin that exposed long, pointed teeth at the corners of her mouth.

"Your bodies will feed the *balamobs*, the jaguar spirits, who will smile on us and bring good fortune. As for your daughter…" Ix Chel turned her head upwards, towards the top of the great pyramid behind her. "See for yourselves. The virgin awaits my blade even now."

The powerful voice grew even louder, the rumbling tones deepening to a feral snarl. She raised her hands upwards in supplication. "Tonight I shall dine on her living heart and her blood will give me strength to free my priests!"

Ethan looked up at the top of the pyramid. Distracted earlier by Ix Chel's lissome descent, he hadn't noticed the second figure in the chamber.

The figure that stood bound and gagged at the wide opening.

Even from a distance, there was no mistaking her identity. Jenny wore only a thin, white robe. The gossamer-sheer material spread out behind her in the evening breeze, held closed by a thin rope around her waist. Her copper hair shimmered like liquid metal pouring over her shoulders. Her eyes were wide and frantic as she looked down at the people below.

"Take them away!" the High Priestess said.

"No! Not my daughter!" Heathcliff pushed past the others and lunged forward.

Hector brought up his gun.

"Professor, no!" Ethan threw his body into the professor without thinking. The roar of the gun and the sledgehammer blow to his chest seemed to happen simultaneously.

Ethan collapsed on the ground. Fire filled his chest. Ix Chel spoke, but he couldn't understand her words. Dark brown arms entered his field of vision. Arms appeared to one side, dragging something into

the night. The professor? Was he dead as well? Ethan looked up, saw the feline eyes of Ix Chel hovering over him.

In the erratic light of the torches, her face seemed to grow longer, her eyes more golden. As if she was becoming something else.

Something not quite human.

Then his strength failed him and his head fell to the side.

More words reached him, as if from a great distance. Heathcliff, his old friend, shouting. “You can stop this, Ethan. It’s not too late.”

His head filled with a buzzing, as if a thousand bees filled his skull. Thoughts misfired, struggled for coherence.

Heathcliff? No, you’re dead.

Stop it? Stop what?

They have Jenny.

There was nothing he could do. No more miracles. He’d looked inside himself for the courage to face his fear of revealing his true self, but it wasn’t there. Where once had beaten the heart of a warrior now only indecision remained, pushing weak, timid blood through his veins.

“She loves you, Ethan. She told me. She always has.”

Heathcliff’s voice again. Or was he dreaming?

Dimly, he was aware of his body moving across sharp stones.

It didn’t matter. It was over. He was dying, and it was too late to change that. Soon he’d join the professor, together in death as in life.

Images came to life inside his brain. Jenny sitting by the fire, her voluptuous body outlined against the tents. Jenny atop the pyramid, flashes of pale flesh and forbidden treasure showing when the wind tossed back her white garment.

Jenny, lying underneath him, clothes and flesh torn to pieces, her beautiful face covered in her own blood.

No! That could never happen. He wouldn’t allow it. That’s why he’d never let himself…let the beast…

More rocks scraped against his back. He forced his eyes open. Popi and Luz stood in front of him, hands gripping is arms, preparing to lift his body. He turned his head, and through a haze of pain recognized the black hole behind him.

A *cenote*, an ancient Mayan well.

"Do it." Hector Veracruz's voice.

The hands pulled and pushed. His body teetered at the edge of the *cenote*. Ethan closed his eyes again. A final push, then peaceful oblivion. All his pain and sorrow would be gone.

There's still time to make the right decision. This time he knew the thought was his own, even if it sounded like the professor's voice. As always, the professor served as his conscience, his moral compass.

Damn you, Heathcliff!

With his last ounces of strength, he clutched at Popi's shirt just as the two guards let him go, and together they toppled into the blackness.

Free…

Rory Amos watched in horror as the two men disappeared into the *cenote*'s opening. Popi's wordless scream echoed up from of the ancient tunnel and then stopped, cut off by death or distance. Not that it mattered. *Cenotes* could be hundreds of feet deep, and usually led to underground lakes or rivers that eventually fed into the ocean. There was no surviving a drop like that.

"Watch the others!" Veracruz shouted to Luz. He ran to the edge of the *cenote* and peered into the Stygian darkness.

"That's the way, Ethan," Rory said, anger and sorrow filling his voice. "At least you took one of the bastards with you."

Despair washed over him in a black wave. Ethan was gone. The professor was somewhere inside the temple, dragged there by Ix Chel herself, most likely for some sadistic ritual.

That left him and Elton Harrison, and it didn't look good for them, waiting their turn to be thrown into the bottomless well.

Veracruz let out a short exclamation of fear and stepped back from the opening. Dark spatters of liquid ran down the man's face, and a larger stain stood out on his green shirt. Something flew out of the hole and bounced off the stone wall surrounding the *cenote*. It took Rory a moment to recognize the object, and even then he couldn't believe it.

Popi's head?

A bellow of pure rage sounded within the *cenote*. The insensate anger in the long, drawn-out cry brought terrified howls from the jaguars in the jungle.

A figure emerged from the pit, flying upwards into the night sky. Wide, leathery wings blotted the stars as the creature banked and turned back towards the gathered humans.

"Good Lord!" Harrison fell down and threw his arms over his head.

Hector Veracruz's shotgun roared once, twice. The smaller, sharper reports of Luz's pistol followed, both men trying futilely to aim at the swooping, soaring figure overhead.

There was a pause while the two men reloaded. In that instant, the dark figure landed in front of Luz. Muscular arms, covered in lizard-like scales, shot out and long, curved talons stabbed into the man's neck and chest. The snarling beast pulled him forward to where a gaping mouth full of triangular teeth waited.

Luz had time to utter a single bleat of terror before monstrous jaws closed on his neck and tore it away. Blood spurted in all directions. It splashed across Hector Veracruz's face, and he dropped the shotgun to wipe frantically at his eyes with both hands.

The creature tossed Luz's corpse to the side, and Amos was finally able to get a good look at it.

It stood well over six feet tall, on powerfully built legs. Under the tattered remnants of a tan safari shirt and pants, its chest was broad and hairless. A fine patina of scales covered the entire body, reflecting the torchlight in a myriad of tiny starbursts.

On top of the thick neck sat a head with a massive, broad snout like a bear's. Tall, pointed ears rose up on either side of its head. Its eyes burned red as coals, aflame with a malevolent hate that turned Rory's legs to rubber.

Veracruz fell to his hands and knees. He scuttled backwards, shouting "Diablo! Diablo!"

The demonic presence looked past the jaguar cultist and spoke, its rough voice thick and clotted with Luz's blood, its words bent into strange shapes from being forced out of an inhuman mouth.

"Rory, go back to the temple. Find the professor and Jenny. I'll take care of Ix Chel."

The creature grabbed Veracruz with one clawed hand, unfurled its wings, and rose swiftly into the air.

"Did you hear…those clothes…it's not possible." Harrison grabbed at the wall of the *cenote* to support himself, still staring in the direction where the monster had disappeared.

"We've seen a lot tonight that isn't possible. Whatever, *whoever*, that thing was, it had the right idea. We've got to save Jenny and the professor."

"The professor's dead! And so is Jenny." Harrison's voice trembled with a note of hysteria. "What we've got to do is get the hell out of here before…that thing comes back for us."

Rory wrapped two fists in the scientist's shirt and hauled him forward. "You can either come with me or stay here. But I'm not giving up yet."

He let go of Harrison. Although the *cenote* lay at the far edge of the city, he could still see the Temple de Sangre rising above the other ruins. Fires burned at the top, a deadly beacon in the darkness.

As he ran through the ancient streets, he prayed he wouldn't have to be the one to tell the winged demon the professor was dead.

At the temple's peak, Ethan found himself in a scene from Guatemala's barbaric past. Jenny lay unconscious on a stone altar, her hands and feet tied to iron spikes set into the solid rock.

Signs of a struggle were evident. Scratches marred her porcelain skin and her robe was in tatters. Her hair, its fiery color enhanced by the blazing torches, spread out beneath her head like a fan of spun bronze.

Ix Chel stood with her back to Ethan, chanting a prayer to her foul gods. Her raised hands clutched an obsidian blade that appeared blood-red as it reflected the light of the fires.

Ethan leaped from the window ledge onto the Priestess's back, knocking her away from the altar. He'd expected his attack to stun the woman, but she twisted underneath him and brought the blade up and into his stomach.

It wasn't a disabling blow, but the pain was enough to wring a cry from him as he rolled away from her.

He quickly rose to his feet, the wound already closing, only to find himself facing a different enemy.

The diminutive teenager with the beautiful face was gone. In her place was a beast half jaguar and half human, with a flattened muzzle where her nose and mouth once were.

Ebony fur covered her entire body. Although she stood on her hind legs, her knees and ankles held a feline, not human, shape, lending a pronounced crouch to her posture. Her hands and feet were now

tremendous paws, each digit longer than a man's finger and tipped with a wicked-looking claw as sharp as any blade.

Her chest still bore the rounded outline of a woman's figure, but now twin lines of teats poked through the fur of her belly. A long, twitching tail extended behind her.

In the cat-like visage of her metamorphosed face, her wild, amber eyes finally seemed at home.

"So the legends are true," Ethan growled. He held his hands outwards, ready for the were-jaguar's attack.

Ix Chel's response was a wall-shaking howl as she sprang.

Ethan met her attack, gripping her shoulders with his claws even as her own dagger-like nails gouged his scaly flesh. Her momentum carried them backwards into the altar, and Ethan leaned back, using his leverage to kick out with his legs and send the she-beast across the chamber. She hit the far wall with a grunt and regained her balance with lightning speed.

A wicked grin spread across her short snout, white fangs standing out against black fur.

As if by some secret signal, the two mythical creatures leaped at each other once more, claws and teeth fighting to inflict damage. Blood flew and animal voices roared.

Behind them, Jenny moaned as consciousness slowly returned.

More than a hundred feet below, Rory Amos and Elton Harrison stared up at the epic battle going on in the altar chamber.

"Jenny's up there. She's still alive." Rory pointed.

"It will take us forever to reach her. I don't think my legs can make it up those stairs."

"Maybe there's another way. Don't these pyramids always have a secret entrance?"

"How should I bloody know? I'm a doctor, not an archeologist." Nevertheless, the two of them circled the temple, looking for any sign of a hidden doorway.

What they found instead was a wide-open entrance set into the rear wall.

"That must be how they got Jenny up there. C'mon!" Rory grabbed a torch and led the way inside.

"Mr. Amos, let's not be hasty. That Veracruz fellow might be somewhere around here…"

"He is." Amos motioned with the torch.

On the floor just past the entrance lay Hector's body. Blood ran from ragged bite marks in his neck and deep furrows carved into his chest, and one arm sat at an unnatural angle.

Harrison brought his own torch down for a closer look, then jumped back when the body opened its eyes.

"Diablo," Veracruz whispered, before falling back into unconsciousness.

"Leave him," Rory said. "We need to get to the top before it's too late."

They moved across the wide chamber, their torches revealing pictographs depicting violent, bloody scenes of battle, jaguars and humans fighting side-by-side against other tribes. The flickering firelight gave the impression of movement and made the brutal carvings come to life. Always in the background of each scene, looming over everything, was the Temple de Sangre.

The two men ducked through an archway and emerged into a smaller chamber. Dark shapes lay strewn about the floor.

"Now what the hell?" Harrison muttered. He bent for a closer look. "Jesus! They're dead bodies. Mummies."

"Forget them, I found the way up," Rory said, motioning towards a staircase carved into the inside walls of the pyramid.

Unlike the exterior stairs with their narrow, high steps, the interior stairs were of normal dimensions.

The spiraling ascent left them winded and with shaking legs. Rory was the first to emerge into the sacrificial chamber, and then had to duck as two monstrous shapes rolled past him, locked in combat.

“Hurry!” He reached down and helped Harrison from the stairs. They hid behind the altar.

“Now what?” Harrison asked.

Before Amos could answer, the jaguar creature rose up on its hind legs and dove forward, driving the demon into the staircase opening.

Together they fell through, their furious cries diminishing as they tumbled into space.

“Now we untie Jenny and get the hell out of here.”

Ix Chel’s grip prevented Ethan from unfurling his wings as they plummeted down through the pyramid. With the ground coming up fast, he managed to twist their bodies so he landed to one side instead of beneath her.

Even so, the impact knocked him senseless. He fought the blackness, knowing that if Ix Chel recovered before him, he was finished.

He pulled himself to his knees and fought for breath. Around him lay the mummified bodies of ancient Mayans. He also smelled fresh blood. Hector’s.

“Don’t kill her.”

The hoarse whisper startled Ethan. He looked around the room until he saw Heathcliff Pascal leaning against a wall.

“Professor?” Ethan wasn’t sure he could believe his eyes. The smell of the man was different.

Feline.

"Ethan, listen to me. I was wrong. She is the last of her kind. Leave her. Take Jenny and others, and just go."

"Professor, what did she do to you?" Ethan let his body return to his human form as he moved across the room.

"The one thing I'd never allowed you to do." Pascal shook his head. "Hurry. I can feel the changes taking place inside me. Soon I won't be…I won't be my own man."

Heathcliff held out something. "Here." It was Ethan's long-barrel Colt. "Do it, before she awakens."

"No. If I kill her now…"

"You care for the historian."

Ix Chel's voice turned Ethan around. She stood near the stone staircase. Human again, she'd pulled her long hair forward over her shoulders to cover her nakedness.

"Yes."

"He was dying." She walked slowly around the staircase, keeping her distance. Each step revealed, and then hid, portions of her body.

Ethan knew it for the truth. He said nothing.

"I saved him."

"You made him a slave." Ethan's hand tightened on the gun. Every gift came with a price; Ethan's was the beast within him, the demon that craved hot, fresh blood. The granting of immortality was a long and painful process for both parties, one he'd have gladly endured to keep his old friend around forever. Except the professor had never craved it, had never wanted to be anything other than mortal.

Ix Chel's gift was different, but no less monstrous. The professor would be bound to her forever.

"No." The Priestess shook her head. "He is not yet mine. I have the power to bring life from death. All I need is blood. One more sacrifice, and anyone who shares my blood"—she spread her arms at

the mummified corpses around them—"will rise again. When they do, your friend will be young and healthy once more, as I have already given him some of myself."

A musky scent filled the air, full of dark promises. Ethan struggled against the primeval lust it raised in him.

"So to save the father you must kill the daughter? I can't allow that."

"I can." Hearing Jenny's voice cleared his head. She descended the last few steps into the chamber, Amos and Harrison behind her.

"No, my child," Heathcliff gasped. "I couldn't live with myself knowing it was your death that gave me life."

"And I couldn't go on, knowing you died because of me," she said.

Ethan watched as she went to her father. Even Ix Chel's animal magnetism was no match for Jenny's beauty. She'd tied one remnant of her robe around her waist in a makeshift skirt, while another draped over her chest, a reverse cape that did little to hide any of her secrets.

He fought to turn his attention away from her.

"There must be another way. If it's blood you need, why not take mine?" He held out his arm to the Mayan Priestess.

She shook her head, and he could almost believe true sadness shone in her eyes. "It is not just the blood. It is the life energy. Only a virgin will do, for theirs is the most powerful life force."

"What happens if you can't make your sacrifice?"

"Your friend will die. My people will die. There are limits to what even I can do. Until you came to me, I feared I would live out the rest of my life in solitude."

"No, Priestess, I will not fail you!" Hector Veracruz stumbled forward, an obsidian blade in his hand, blood running from his chest. "Her blood shall be yours!"

Ethan moved as fast as he could, but the distance was too far. Hector lunged. Someone screamed.

Ethan reached out and twisted Hector's head back and to the side. There was a wet snap, and the man fell to the floor.

Next to the body of Elton Harrison.

The obsidian knife stuck out of Harrison's chest. Bright blood pumped out, spilling across his shirt.

Ethan knelt down by the body, touched his fingers to the neck. "No pulse. He was braver than we gave him credit for."

"Oh, shit." Amos's curse made Ethan look up.

All around them, the mummies were rising to their feet. Like a film played at twice-normal speed, their dried, wrinkled flesh filled out and grew smooth. Brittle hair regained its youthful luster, and skeletal faces turned into human visages.

Two dozen sets of amber-colored eyes stared at them, and then the reborn priests and soldiers knelt and bowed to their priestess.

Ethan turned to Ix Chel. "You said it had to be Jenny."

The priestess appeared as surprised as anyone. "No. I said the sacrifice needed to be a virgin. Your friend…" She stopped speaking, waved a hand at Harrison's body. "I did not know."

"Ethan." Heathcliff Pascal's voice, strong and full of vigor, drew everyone's attention.

"Professor?"

"Father!"

The man Jenny Pascal threw herself against looked much as he had when Ethan first met him, more than thirty-five years earlier. With one small difference.

His previously sky-blue eyes were now a rich honey-golden color, with tall, narrow pupils.

The eyes of a jaguar.

Heathcliff pulled himself away from Jenny's enthusiastic embrace. "Ethan, we must speak. Alone."

Ethan's stomach dropped. There could be only one reason they needed to talk.

They walked past Ix Chel's revived priests and priestesses, already gathering around their goddess and chanting prayers. Outside the temple, Ethan could feel the night nearing its end.

"Ethan, I'm a young man again, but the future still belongs to you and Jenny."

He kept speaking, not waiting for Ethan to respond.

"I know she'll be happy with you. You're the reason she's never let herself be with another man. But now she's going to need you as well, need you to do what needs to be done. She's going to want to come back here, and you can never let that happen."

Ethan nodded. Jenny was a strong-willed woman with a volatile temper. Those qualities, together with his desire to please her, could make him susceptible to any demand she might make.

Centuries of being a man couldn't change the fact that the love of a beautiful woman could be overpowering.

"You can't leave here." It wasn't a question.

"No, not alone," replied the professor. "My soul is bound to Ix Chel now. This is my home. These are my people."

Unlike earlier, the professor's voice held no regret or anger over what had been done to him. Ethan couldn't help feeling resentful over that. He'd offered his friend immortality—or something very close to it—on many occasions over the years, and been rebuked each time. And now the old man was happy to achieve it against his will? It took all of Ethan's willpower not to release his Beast and challenge his friend right there.

He's already changed, Ethan realized. *The thing inside me senses it, knows him for an enemy now, not a friend.*

"What of their mission to build a new Mayan empire?"

Pascal nodded. "An empire of were-jaguars. A formidable enemy of mankind someday."

"Someday?"

Heathcliff smiled. Already his eye teeth seemed longer, sharper. "Right now the Gente de Jaguar number less than fifty. We have much work to do, rebuilding our city and guarding it from discovery. We live long lives, but it will still take several generations before we can lead our people out into the world."

"Your people?"

"Ix Chel wants me as her consort. That's why she forced the change on me. It's not the life I would have chosen, but now that the change is made…I don't regret it. I will advise her on the ways of the world, teach her the history of mankind." He smiled again. "Father her heirs."

Ethan thought about the exotic woman who served as the Moon Goddess's earthly servant. Her proud beauty, combining the human ideals of feminine splendor with the animal attraction of a wild jungle cat. Under her long, silky hair would be a body that only aged one year for every ten. Or perhaps twenty. Firm. Young. Ripe. A body built for pleasure, housing a mind and soul meant to rule an empire.

She would be a Cleopatra for the twentieth century.

"We'll see each other again, someday." Ethan knew his words were as much threat as farewell.

"I fear we will. On the battlefield. But not before my grandchildren's children have grown and died. Be good to her, Ethan. I have enjoyed your friendship most of all."

"And I yours. Rule well, old man." Ethan clasped hands with his oldest friend one last time. Inside him, the Beast roared to be let out and finish what it had started.

"No!" Jenny's shout startled them from their goodbyes. "I won't leave you."

Heathcliff didn't ask if she'd heard. "You must, my dear. The time has come for you and Ethan to start your lives together. Just as I will start a new life here."

She turned towards Ethan. Something new burned in her eyes. A promise of love. Passion.

Desire.

Then sadness took over as she looked back at her father and nodded. Ethan shook his head, knowing she'd accepted the situation much too quickly. Jenny was far too stubborn to give up like that; he knew that in the coming years it would take all his powers—physical and mental—to keep her from returning.

Ethan left them alone to their goodbyes. Inside the temple, he gathered his and Jenny's packs. Rory Amos was placing a blanket over Harrison's body.

"C'mon, Rory. It's time to go."

A gentle hand touched his shoulder, stopping him. Something flowed between them as Ix Chel came close. An electric charge carrying a promise of untold wanton pleasures and deadly violence. Standing next to him in human form, her musky fragrance sent his senses reeling. She pressed herself against him, her hair a thin and ineffective barrier between their flesh.

She leaned forward, bringing her lips near his neck.

And licked him.

Her raspy tongue caressed him for a brief moment. She drew back even as he felt his body respond against his will.

"What was that for?" Ethan asked, once his voice was his own again.

"Earlier I gave you much pain. Now I give you a small pleasure, for you have given me a worthy mate. For that I am grateful. I will assure his happiness here."

Ethan had no doubt she would.

"Enjoy your life together, Ix Chel. I hope we never meet again."

She smiled, purposely showing her sharp teeth. A challenge in the animal kingdom.

"And I cannot wait until we do." She strode away.

Ethan left her to her people. Outside, Jenny came to him and took his hand. The new look in her eyes went well with her nearly naked body. The thin material couldn't hide the signs of her excitement.

Ethan realized that from now on, there'd be a woman on every expedition.

For once, the idea didn't upset him.

He wondered what kind of adventures they would have together.

With a smile, he pulled a cheroot from his pack.

Starting with tonight.

DEATH DO US PART

I grew up loving the old Tales From The Crypt-style comics and stories, and that's what inspired this tale of love, revenge, and nightmare creatures from the grave. It has everything a good pulp tale should—violence mystery, and more violence, with a touch of dark humor.

Catherine Stanhope sent her Mercedes convertible speeding down River Road in a blind rage.

This was nothing new for her; anger in all its phases—irritation, rage, fury, vehemence, and just plain pissed-offedness—made up the majority of her days.

In this particular instance, a call from Art had lit her fuse, and had her driving at sixty miles per hour despite the sharp curves and lack of street lamps on River Road. Even set on high, her headlights struggled keep up with the car's speed, their twin cones carving away less of the darkness each time Catherine applied more pressure to the gas pedal. Although she didn't know it, only luck and German engineering had kept her from flipping over so far.

A divorce. The bastard wants a divorce! How dare he?

Her intention was to return home and give Art what he had coming to him. In her mind, she saw this as part of her duty as a wife, to school her husband in the ways of marriage and commitment. Much like a child who needed to be taught a lesson, sometimes that involved using a hand or frying pan to keep his attention. It wasn't violence, it wasn't abuse. Those were just words made up by therapists who believed in coddling rather than teaching. The same therapists who poisoned Art and Connor against her after she'd finally started to make headway. Ten years of love and hard work down the drain. Well, if they thought she was giving in without a fight, they could go to hell. All of them—the therapists with their high-and-mighty words, the doctors with their pills and Art with his fantasy of divorce.

Focused single-mindedly on the lessons she intended to dole out, she didn't notice the car behind her until flashing red lights lit the darkness like an alien craft swooping in for the kill.

Police! Her first thought was to press down on the gas. She was only a couple of miles from home. If she could just get there, Art would

talk to them, explain that it was a simple misunderstanding. Cops never arrested wives of other cops.

Then a shard of common sense penetrated her rage. There was no way she could outrun a police car. Better to just accept the ticket and be on her way again. Let Art take care of it in the morning. It was the least he could do. After all, it was his fault she'd needed a few drinks to calm down in the first place.

She pulled over to the right side, where an overgrown field bordered the road. On the left, a sharp embankment led down to the wide, black ribbon of the Hudson River. She waited for the officer to approach, but instead heard an amplified voice.

"Step out of the vehicle, please."

A new fire started inside Catherine. What did this cop think, she was drunk? How dare he! She'd only had two Cosmos at the club. Half the goddamned town was probably—

"Ms. Stanhope, step out of the car."

That caught her by surprise. They knew who she was. And the voice…it actually sounded familiar. Catherine opened the door and stood next to the convertible, unafraid of passing cars. River Road seldom saw any traffic during the day; at night it was virtually desolate.

Half-blinded by the unmarked car's headlights, Catherine squinted at the dark silhouette approaching her. She didn't recognize it until the glow of her tail lights revealed his face.

"You! But you're not supposed to—"

Pain blasted through Catherine's head as something hard struck her left temple. The world went fuzzy and then black.

When her vision returned, she was behind the wheel again. Blurred images of trees and rocks flashed by, and it took her a moment to realize the car was moving forward. In the same instant, the world tilted on its axis, sending her hard into the steering wheel. The car

bounced and jumped but her seat belt held her tight. A ball of white exploded in front of her and slammed her back in the seat.

And then all sense of movement disappeared, replaced by freezing cold.

The river!

Instinct took over. Catherine struggled to free herself from the seatbelt but her hands tangled in the half-deflated airbag. Foul-tasting water filled her mouth, choking her. The water rose quickly, past her nose and over her head.

Even as her body fought against her approaching death, Catherine's mind focused on one thought.

I will get you for this. I will be back.

☠☠☠

Staring down at his wife's coffin, Art Stanhope wondered at all the different flavors of guilt.

Could he have prevented Catherine's suicide? Been a better husband? Avoided all the headaches and problems and sorrow by just leaving her when he first discovered he no longer loved her?

And, above all else, should he have waited until after they divorced before having an affair with her sister?

The worst part, he thought, while watching the last of the mourners drop their roses into the cold, wet hole that would serve as Catherine's final resting place, is that he had no answers to any of his questions.

Catherine had been one crazy bitch, especially at the end. Possessive, demanding, and more than a little delusional. But suicidal? There'd never been a hint. So how could you prevent what you never expected? As for being a better husband, sure, cheating on your wife wasn't exactly the best way to improve a marriage, but it wasn't like

Catherine knew. He and Missy Sawyer had only started their affair a couple of weeks before…

She went off the deep end? He grimaced at the poor choice of words, considering how she'd died.

He knew he shouldn't feel guilty. Before giving in to his feelings for Missy, he'd done everything he could to try and save their marriage. Had even suggested counseling, but Catherine refused to consider it.

You could have left her.

That was true. But would it have really solved anything? Stopped Catherine's mood swings or her violent outbursts? Prevented her from accusing him of trying to poison her or drive her crazy? Or would it have simply hastened the inevitable outcome, sent her off that cliff months earlier? More than once, while she was still alive, he'd thought about divorce, and then decided against it. Mainly because each time, he got a picture in his head of Catherine boiling their cat alive and leaving it on the porch, or showing up one night with a gun and an ultimatum. Besides, admitting the marriage had failed would be music to his father's ears. Jeremy Stanhope had never wanted Art to marry Catherine, and even getting a grandson hadn't softened his stance on her.

"She's not right for you, son," he'd said after learning Art had proposed. "You can do better."

They'd argued, and that had led to a rift between them that had only grown wider with each passing year, to the point where he now only saw his father on holidays, when all of his other babysitters backed out or at police functions.

It wasn't until he'd been sure Missy felt the same about him as he did about her that he'd decided to end things. On the night Catherine died, he'd told her he didn't think things were working out, that he couldn't take it anymore. She'd stormed out and he'd assumed they'd pick up the argument the next day. Only in his mind, it ended with him moving out, not going to the morgue to identify her body.

Never once had he imagined she might commit suicide. Him, yes. But her? Not Catherine, who thought of herself as the center of everything, a dominant sun around which all the lesser people orbited.

Yet they'd found her note in the car, waterlogged and smeared but still legible.

"It's time to go," a soft, tearful voice said behind him. He nodded. Heard Missy retreat a few steps, leaving him to his final goodbyes. Everyone else had already left, including his father, who'd taken Connor for the weekend.

His final goodbyes. And with them, the final guilt.

I don't feel bad that she's dead. I should. I loved her, once. She gave me Connor, who was about as good a kid as you could have and hadn't deserved all the shit we put him through with our fighting. Now all I can think is that she finally did something nice for me. For us.

She freed us.

Art dropped his rose into the hole.

"Goodbye, Catherine. Thank you."

☠☠☠

Out of respect for Connor, Art waited six months before telling him that Aunt Missy was now dating Daddy. He took it better than Art expected. Possibly because he'd always been close to Missy anyhow, loved her like crazy, or possibly because she'd been there for both Stanhope men before and after Catherine's death, a rock in their ocean of turmoil.

"Is Aunt Missy going to be my new mommy?" Connor asked when Art finished explaining that *"Daddy and Aunt Missy like each other in a different way than just friends. Like on TV, when you see people kissing and holding hands."* At eight, Connor understood the concept of dating, but Art had found that anytime he could use a television example, it sped up the explanation process.

"No. Your mommy will always be your mommy, even if she's up in heaven now. Missy will be…your substitute mommy. You know how sometimes you have a substitute teacher in school, when your regular teacher gets sick?"

Connor had nodded. Art expected questions about how Art could love another lady besides Mommy, or why Aunt Missy was going to sleep in the same bed where Mommy used to sleep, but Connor had simply gone back to his comic book.

Later, after Connor was in bed and they sat curled up on the couch together, Art wondered aloud to Missy if perhaps it was because so many kids at school had parents who had divorced and remarried.

"That could be," Missy said, sipping her wine. "Or maybe it's that deep down, he knows we're all better off this way. You and Catherine were always going at it, so this new, happy atmosphere has to be making him feel better at some level."

Art smiled and lifted his glass to her. "Good point. So I'm better off, and so is Connor. What about you?"

Missy chuckled. "I've got you, of course. And Connor. I love that kid like he was my own. Plus, now that I'm moving in, I'll be out of that crazy apartment."

She said it in a humorous way, but Art caught the tone of actual relief behind the statement.

"Still fighting with the neighbors, huh?"

"Not just them anymore." She shook her head. "Now it's the landlord, too. He says I'm 'harassing' the other tenants with my complaints. I told him I wouldn't have to if he'd just do his job and find out who the hell is really causing all the problems."

Art finished his own wine and pulled Missy closer. For months, she'd been suffering through a series of disturbances in her apartment. Screaming coming through the walls. Thumping footsteps. Things falling off shelves, which Missy blamed on one of the neighbors either doing construction of some kind or playing the bass on their stereo too

high and sending vibrations through the walls. At first, they'd joked about her apartment being haunted. Then, as things got worse, Missy had expressed concern that it was Catherine making her life miserable. Art had quickly and forcefully told her to stop thinking like that. They'd already agreed not to feel guilty about dating.

The problem was each time she called the superintendent the noises and vibrations stopped before he got there. Now he no longer even responded, which was why Missy had begun calling the building's owner directly. He insisted no one else had heard anything and no one was doing construction, that the superintendent had checked all the apartments. In turn, she'd accused him of ignoring her complaints.

"Well, the only times the walls shake here is when we bang the headboard too hard," he said. It had been his idea for her to move in. After all, why should she have to live like that? She'd already been through so much, what with her sister dying and then devoting all her spare time to helping him and Connor. It was the least he could do.

Besides, he wanted her around as much as possible. And seeing a nice, stable relationship would be good for Connor. So despite the fact that they'd always said they should wait a year before she moved in, let themselves grieve properly and get used to being alone, he'd gone ahead and asked.

And she'd said yes.

"Do you want more wine?"

She finished her last sip and handed him the glass. "It's Saturday night, I'm with the man I love and Connor's asleep. Hell, yes! But I've got an idea."

"What's that?"

Missy winked at him. "Let's take the rest of the bottle into the bedroom."

He smiled. “Best idea I’ve heard all day.” He reached for his glass, but just as his hand got there, it fell over and shattered on the coffee table.

“Wow.” Missy stood up. “I’ll get some paper towels. Good thing it was empty, Mister Clumsy.”

“I never touched it,” Art said.

“Yeah, right. One glass of wine and we have to cut you off.”

He laughed. “Or maybe the ghost in your apartment followed you here.”

Missy pointed a finger at him. “Don’t even joke about that. I wouldn’t put it past my sister to—”

“Dad? What was that noise?”

Art turned and saw Connor in the hallway, his hair mussed and his eyes only half open. “Nothing, buddy. I just broke a glass by accident. Go on back to bed.”

“I can’t. Something keeps poking me every time I fall asleep. Can you check my room for monsters?”

With a sigh, Art glanced at Missy. “I’ll get him tucked in and meet you in a few minutes, okay?”

She nodded. “Go head. I’ll clean up in here.”

Grateful for her being so understanding—since Catherine’s death, Connor hadn’t been sleeping well, which wasn’t surprising but it was annoying at times—he put his arm around his son and herded him down the hall.

“Now, what have I told you about there being no such thing as monsters…”

☠☠☠

Two months after Missy moved in, the idea of a ghost was no longer a joking matter. Glasses toppled over and broke with regularity

in empty rooms, pictures fell from walls, and the television had acquired a nasty habit of turning itself on in the middle of the night.

Although neither of them wanted to believe an angry spirit haunted the house, they could no longer dismiss the strange happenings with weak explanations of earth tremors, construction, or faulty wiring. Gone were the days when one of them would mention ghosts and the other would counter with a rational alternative.

What was once considered whimsy had grown into a terrible reality, their house morphing into something out of a horror novel.

Connor's complaints about nightmares also grew worse, but for Art the final straw came when Connor came into the kitchen for breakfast one Saturday morning with livid bruises on his arm.

In the shape of a hand.

"How did that happen?" he asked his son.

"Mommy did it," Connor said, his voice still muddled with sleep.

"What?" Missy paused in the middle of pouring coffee.

"She kept waking me up all night, telling me I was a nasty child," the boy continued, unaware of the looks his father and aunt were giving each other. "Then she grabbed me and tried to pull me out of bed."

Art said nothing, but later, after Connor was ensconced on the couch watching cartoons, he pulled Missy aside.

"I don't care what Doctor Sloane says, this isn't guilt or coincidence or a reaction to loss."

He expected Missy to argue, as she'd done in the past when he'd disagreed with the psychologist's explanations for Connor's problems, or suggested they take the boy to a different doctor. Instead, she bit her lip, her face as pale as if she'd been the one visited by her sister's spirit.

"It's Catherine," she said, finally putting a name to the specter infecting their home. "The bitch is haunting us."

Art nodded. "I'm calling Father Tony right now."

☠☠☠

"You're lucky we grew up together." Father Anthony Donello—Tony to his friends—took a beer from the fridge and pointed it at Art. "Anyone else would have Child Services on the way over here to take Connor away from you."

For the past hour, Father Tony had listened to Art detail all the strange happenings in the house. To his credit, he hadn't laughed, although he did smirk a bit when Art mentioned how the clock radio in the bedroom kept turning on and playing Art and Catherine's wedding song whenever he and Missy tried to make love. But when Art asked Connor to "show Uncle Tony the bruises on your arms" Tony's face had grown serious and he'd shaken his head.

"Those are too small for a man's hands," he'd said, pointing at the five finger-shaped welts on Connor's skin. "And too big for a child's."

Now, standing in the kitchen, Art sipped his own beer. "So, you believe me?"

Tony shrugged. "I believe that you and Missy would sooner slit your own throats than hurt Connor. I believe there are things in this world science can't explain. But ghosts? That one I have trouble with. And why would Catherine want to hurt her own son? Or terrorize you, for that matter?"

"How the hell do I know?" Art heard the frustration in his voice, took a breath to calm himself before continuing. "She was half crazy for a long time. Maybe she finally lost it and that's why she killed herself. Or maybe it happened after she died. Maybe she's pissed about me and Missy. Frankly, I don't care why. I just want it to end."

In the living room, four light bulbs popped. Tony's hand twitched and beer spilled down his arm.

"What the hell?"

"Exactly." Art gestured at the broken bulbs. "That's the kind of shit we have to deal with every day."

"It could just be an electrical problem."

Art rolled his eyes. "Don't you think I've thought of that? We've had electricians, contractors, plumbers, anyone you can think of, check the place over. Nothing."

"All right, so something strange is going on. But, c'mon, ghosts?"

At that moment, a terrified scream filled the apartment. Tony jumped and his beer fell to the floor. He turned towards the living room, where the television had turned on by itself.

On the screen, children and adults watched in horror while a woman in a gray uniform stepped off a ledge and hanged herself.

"Did that just happen?" Tony's eyes were wide.

"Happens at least once a day. Same movie every time. *The Omen*. Always at the exact same point, where the maid commits suicide."

Tony's hands shook as he picked up his beer.

"Let's go down to my car."

Art frowned. "Why?"

"Because we're going to bless the shit out of this house."

☠☠☠

Art opened the door and cringed at the pungent scents of musk and sandalwood that rolled out in a heavy cloud. In the three weeks since Tony Donello's last blessing, the heady mélange of incense had become a constant—and increasingly unwelcome—companion. All their clothes reeked of it, to the point where the other officers had begun making comments. The smell had even contaminated Art's car. Most days, he felt like it was permanently crusted inside his nose.

And the incense was only the beginning of what Tony had done to the house. Crosses hung on all the walls, so many of them that Art, Missy, and Connor refused to bring guests over because the place looked like part of the movie set for a sequel to *Carrie*. Bottles of Holy Water sat on every windowsill and above every doorway. Stains on the

walls and carpet showed where Tony had splashed jars of the stuff everywhere as he went from room to room, murmuring blessings and prayers in Latin.

Meals, once the high point of each evening, were no longer a time to bond over cooking and eating while conversation and delicious aromas filled the kitchen with love. Instead, they'd devolved into incense-drenched desultory affairs ended as soon as possible.

"I'm home," he called out.

Something went *thump* in the back part of the house.

Art's pulse kicked up a notch. The sound hadn't been loud; most likely it was nothing more than Connor tossing his sneakers into the closet or Missy shutting the door to the dryer.

Except those were noises for a normal house. He'd experienced too many odd happenings the last few months to ignore anything.

"Missy? Connor? You guys okay?" He headed down the hall, checking the different rooms along the way. Kitchen, dining room, bathroom, laundry room—all empty.

At the end of the hall, both bedroom doors were closed.

The feeling in Art's stomach grew worse. Normally, no one closed doors unless they were getting dressed. A chill passed through his body and his shoulders twitched in response. He gripped the knob to Connor's door and took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for anything. Then he threw the door open.

Connor, seated on the bed, looked up from his comic book and pulled one ear bud off, releasing the tinny sounds of pop music.

"Hey, Dad. What's up?"

Art shook his head and looked across the hall at the master bedroom door.

Another *thump*, this time louder.

"Missy." His throat constricted, reducing the word to a whisper. Ignoring Connor's "What's wrong?" he hurried to the door and grabbed the knob.

It refused to turn.

"Missy!" Art pounded his fist on the door. In response, more muffled *thumps* came from inside the room, and this time he felt sure he recognized the sound.

Someone stamping their feet on the floor.

Art reacted instantly, taking two steps back and then slamming his body into the door. It bowed but didn't open. He hit it again and was rewarded with a cracking sound from the area of the knob. For his next attempt, he started all the way from Connor's room and ran full force into the door, bending slightly at the waist so his arm and shoulder hit with maximum force, the way he'd learned back in high school football.

The door crashed open, wood splinters flying from the shattered molding. Art stumbled and then caught himself against the doorframe, his eyes already locking onto Missy's prone form.

For a moment he froze, his brain refusing to accept the reality of the scene before him.

Missy, dressed only in a bra and panties, on the floor by the foot of the bed. Something blue in her mouth. Her eyes terror-wide and her hair in shambles. A pair of jeans wrapped tightly around her ankles, binding her legs together.

Movement caught his eye. More clothes—pants, shirts, one of Connor's Spider-Man bed sheets—winding themselves around her chest, pinning her arms to her sides. As Art watched, one of his dress shirts rose from the laundry basket and dropped over Missy's head. The sleeves quickly tied themselves across her face and she pounded her feet harder.

It's choking her.

The thought of Missy's imminent death broke Art's paralysis and he grabbed the murderous shirt, tearing at the cloth until it released from Missy's face. The sleeves slapped his cheeks, beating him so hard the buttons left circular welts on his skin that wouldn't fade for days. More clothes rose from the basket and attacked. Rolled-up socks flew through the air like fastballs and hit with bruising force. A lace bra whipped him over and over with its strap. The shirt came at him like a boxer, battering his face with lefts and rights until he clutched it with both hands and pulled, tearing the material in two.

Everything stopped.

The clothes in the air dropped to the floor. The two halves of his shirt fell limply over his arms.

There was an instant where the only thing Art heard was his own gasping and his pulse pounding in his head. Then Connor burst into tears and wrapped his arms around Art's leg, pressing himself tight as he cried.

"It's okay," Art said. He pried the boy loose and held him in his arms, hugged him close. "It's okay. Now let's help Missy."

Art knelt down, one arm still around his son, and used his other hand to untie Missy's wrists. With her hands free, she quickly released the cloths binding her feet and he helped her up.

The three of them hugged and cried for several minutes, their love and relief demonstrated far more effectively in actions rather than words. Then Missy pulled them towards the door.

"We have to leave."

They went into the living room, but Art knew she wasn't talking about just the bedroom. She meant the house. As long as Catherine's ghost was around, none of them were safe.

Except where would they go?

His wife's evil spirit had already followed Missy from her apartment to his house. It would surely follow them if they moved

somewhere else. So how far would they need to travel before they were out of her reach? Another state? Another *country?*

Art looked at Missy and Connor, both of them with their heads buried against his chest, dampening his shirt with their tears. He clenched his jaw to keep a frustrated scream from escaping, enraged at his own impotence. As a cop, he'd always felt in control. Sure, there were dangers to driving patrol, but you had your training, your gun, an entire force for backup. But a ghost wasn't something you could apprehend and arrest. You couldn't shoot a malevolent spirit, no matter how much you wanted to.

If only it was that easy. Just go into bedroom, get your service pistol, and…

Jesus Christ. No.

His gun. It was still in the bedroom safe where he stored it each day after coming home from his shift. Missy's gun was in there, too. Plus both their backup pistols.

If Catherine could attack with clothes…

"Stay here." Art pushed out from his family's arms. Connor tried to hold on and it nearly broke Art's heart to pry the boy's fingers loose, but he'd apologize later.

After he made sure his crazy ex-wife couldn't murder them from beyond the grave.

Missy pulled Connor into an embrace, whispering "Hush, honey, it's okay," while giving Art a confused look. Art shook his head and ran down the hall.

How long before Catherine either regained her strength or remembered the safe? Was he overreacting? She'd been haunting them for months and had never done anything with the guns.

She also never tried to kill her own sister before.

Art pulled open the double-doors of the closet just in time to see the dial on the portable safe turning. He reached up and spun the wheel

in the opposite direction in an attempt to buy time and make Catherine start over. The fact that she needed to open the safe the normal way, instead of just tearing the lid off, gave him hope that he could prevent her from getting to the guns.

With one hand gripping the knob so it wouldn't turn, he pulled the safe down from its shelf, ignoring the sharp pain in his shoulder as his arm took the full weight of the heavy box. He ran back down the hall. Missy gasped at the sight of the safe, realizing instantly why he had it.

"Connor, hang on tight!" She hefted the boy in her arms and rolled off the couch onto the floor. Not that it would save them if Catherine got control of a gun. Nowhere in the house would be safe. Built in the sixties, it had thin walls and no basement. Even the backyard offered no protection. Surrounded by a six-foot-high wall to block the noise and the view of the nearby freeway, it was essentially a dead end.

The only chance, Art knew, was to get the safe out of the house and drive as far away as possible. But where?

The station.

As soon as he thought it, he knew the precinct armory represented his only chance. It was halfway across town, but there he could lock the safe away so securely even a ghost couldn't get at it.

He made it to the door and had his car keys in hand when Catherine made her presence known again. The locks on the door clicked shut and invisible hands tried to pull the safe from him. He fought back, clutching it against his chest and wrapping his arms around it.

Something crashed into the wall next to him and shattered, peppering his cheek with tiny shrapnel. Afraid to let go of the safe, he closed his eyes and pressed his face into the corner between the wall and door. A sharp blow hit him in the lower back and a glass figurine fell to the floor. Another caught him in the shoulder, and he realized Catherine was throwing the contents of the curio cabinet at him. He

ducked down, doing his best to protect his head. If she managed to stun him or knock him out, he'd lose his grip on the safe and it would be all over for him and his family.

"Leave him alone, you bitch! Sister or not, I fucking hate you!"

Missy's voice. Art wanted to turn and look, see what the hell she was thinking, when the supernatural force fighting him disappeared. At the same time, he heard objects crashing in the living room and understood exactly what Missy had done.

Bought him time.

He unlocked the door and rushed outside. Twenty feet to his car and he covered the distance like he held an empty cardboard box in his arms instead of a twenty-pound safe. He had the engine started and the car going down the driveway before he grabbed the door and pulled it closed. Then he was speeding down the road and saying a prayer for Missy and Connor to stay safe.

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Art hung up the phone and let out a sigh of relief. Missy and Connor were fine. The barrage of souvenirs and collectibles had ended a few minutes after he'd left. And since he'd had no problems getting to the station house and locking his safe in the armory, he had to assume either Catherine had finally run out of steam or she was still looking for him.

Either way, we're not out of the woods.

There were too many things in the house a malevolent spirit could turn into deadly weapons. Knives, forks, a broken bottle…hell, even a belt could kill someone if used the right way. And they certainly couldn't empty the entire house, which left only one solution.

Get rid of Catherine for good.

He'd already told Missy and Connor to leave the house, check into a hotel someplace. Now he just had to—.

"Everytin' okay, Art?"

Art glanced up, saw Detective Benito Espinosa standing over him, one eyebrow arched up as he stared down.

"Uh, yeah, Benny, fine. Sorry, I had to use your phone. I left my cell at the house."

"No problem, man. You sure you're okay? Like my pops used to say, choo look like sheeet, man."

Art tried to laugh, but the best he could do was muster a weak smile. He pictured himself as Benny was seeing him: sweaty, hair mussed, cuts on his cheek…not the look of a man who'd simply forgotten his phone.

"Yeah, I feel like it too. We…we're doing some renovations at the house, and I had to get away for a while, you know?"

Benny winked at him. "Yeah, I know. My Marta's a *diablo loco* too, whenever we're doing one of her stupid home improvement projects. Hey, how's your old man doin'? Ain't seen him around in a while."

"He's good. A tough old bastard, you know?" Over the years, Art had found it easier to answer questions about his father as vaguely as possible. Jeremy Stanhope had a good reputation in the precinct; people still talked about him, even after five years of retirement. *"Best desk sergeant ever,"* was the number one statement. Usually followed by, *"Sonovabitch could drink like a fish and still box your ears in."*

It was because of his reputation, and his relatively young age—he'd retired at fifty-eight—that he'd been allowed to join the auxiliary police force, which provided backup during emergencies and major events like parades and carnivals.

Of course, Jeremy had only done it so he could keep his full medical, but the Chief didn't care. He'd said having Sgt. Stanhope around occasionally was better than not having him at all.

When Art made Sergeant—the youngest ever on the force—Chief Hirsch had ended his toast with, “Here’s to Art Stanhope, who’s following in his old man’s footsteps!”

Since that day, Art’s stomach burned every time he drank champagne.

“You tell him Bennie says ‘Hi’ next time you see him, okay?” Bennie slapped Art on the shoulder and sauntered away towards the break room.

Glad for the chance to escape further conversation about his father or anything else, Art left the station and headed for the library, where he sat down at a computer and called up a search program. Then he paused.

What the hell did you search for when you had to rid your house of an evil spirit? Exorcists? Witch doctors?

Ghost freakin’ busters?

In the end, he settled on *possessed homes* as a starting point. When he got more than 10,000 hits, he quickly narrowed his search to *getting rid of ghosts* and added in the name of their town. Numerous “self-help” pages came up, and he scrolled past them. He and Missy were well beyond self-help. They needed a professional.

And on page three of his results, he found one.

Madam Ileana Prioleau, Spiritualist.

Art read the first paragraph on the site, unaware he was speaking aloud.

“Thank you for visiting my web site. I am blessed to have the gifts of clairsentience (sensing) and clairvoyance (seeing). These are gifts that have been bestowed upon me from above. Having these gifts also allows me to reach out and help others, whether they are in need of guidance or help with a spirit problem, or are simply looking to contact a loved one.”

Below the information was a contact number. There were other pages on the site, but he'd seen enough. He hit print and went to the front desk to retrieve his document.

Catherine, it's time to send you back where you belong.

Hell.

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"What you ask, this is very difficult."

"But you can do it, right?" Art watched the old woman closely. He'd always been good at reading faces, the tiny changes in expression, the body language of head tilts and eye movements. Combined with voice inflection, they were great ways to tell if someone was lying, telling the truth, or something in between.

Or just plain trying to rip you off.

Madam Ileana Prioleau had turned out to be nothing like he expected. Despite her ethnic name, he'd assumed she'd be American. Probably middle-aged and over-stated, like the psychics you saw on television. Instead, he'd been met at the door by a wizened old woman whose shriveled, wrinkled skin and snow-white hair made determining her age impossible. He figured she had to be in her late seventies or eighties, but if she'd said she was ninety—or even a hundred—he wouldn't have been surprised.

Her accent and name marked her as Northern European. Poland, Hungary, Romania, possibly the Czech Republic. When she spoke, it made Art think of a secondary character in a Hammer vampire movie from the sixties. The only thing American about her was her clothing, a simple long-sleeved gray blouse and a matching skirt, both of which looked as old and wrinkled as their owner. Sensible black tennis shoes covered her feet.

After ushering him into a tidy house decorated in a country farm style, Madam Prioleau listened to Art's story without commenting.

When he'd finished, she'd asked a few questions about Catherine: her age, her temperament, the way she'd died.

What he wanted to do with her ghost.

"I don't care," he'd told her. "Send it to heaven or hell or purgatory or wherever ghosts are supposed to go. Destroy it. Lock it in a box and drop it in a lake for all I care. Just make sure it never bothers me or my family again."

That's when she'd said it would be difficult. And although Art understood that he'd come to her, was counting on her to be an expert in her field, he also had no intentions of letting some old lady rip him off or charge him extra just because he didn't know shit about the supernatural. He was desperate, but not a sucker.

At least he hoped not.

"I can do," she finally said, after much staring into the air and rubbing her whiskery chin. She paused again, and he waited for the reveal. With any luck, he'd be able to talk her down to a reasonable price.

"Will cost, though."

Here it comes.

"I do for a hundred dollars."

"A hundred…wait. What?" Art frowned. "That's all?"

The crone smiled, revealing teeth so yellow she appeared to be wearing wooden dentures. "You want pay more? Fine. Two hundred."

"Deal." Art took out his wallet before his mouth got him in more trouble. "When can you start?"

Madam Prioleau pointed at the clock, which read a little after four. "Magic works best in the dark. You will help me get what I need and drive me to this place. Then we do."

"And you're sure this will work?"

Another wooden smile.

"Madam Prioleau guarantee. Tomorrow, no ghost."

Art nodded. "Let's get started."

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Madam Prioleau's storage room, unlike her physical appearance or the rest of her house, matched Art's expectations exactly.

Seemingly endless racks of cheap metal shelving, the kind you purchased by the box in Home Depot or Wal-Mart, crammed the long, narrow space from floor to ceiling. Each shelf held dozens of jars and bags and boxes, many of them so old the labels were yellowed and crumbling or had fallen off completely. In the dim light of two dirt-encrusted bulbs hanging from the ceiling, Art found it impossible to read any of the remaining hand-written tags.

The odors in the room, a suffocating blend of spices, incense, dust, mildew, and things he couldn't identify, combined to form an almost solid presence, an invisible pillow that felt like it was expanding inside his lungs and preventing them from extracting enough oxygen. He had to fight for each breath, wheezing as he held a wicker basket for Madam Prioleau, who moved from shelf to shelf with complete surety, plucking plastic bags and tiny jars from their resting places and dropping them into the basket. Every movement sent new clouds of microscopic particles into the air, adding to the already intolerable atmosphere.

Each time the spiritualist stopped to retrieve an ingredient for her spell, she muttered the item under her breath, as if mentally checking it off her list. Most of the time, Art couldn't catch her words, losing them to her accent and lack of volume. Of the ones he caught, very few sounded familiar.

Ferret claw. Hand of Glory. Lumbricus terrestris. Amanita phalloides. Bufo marinus. Pig's blood. Despite his worries over eliminating the evil from his house, he found himself wondering where the hell a person acquired this kind of stuff? Was there a spellcaster's

shop on the internet? And how much trouble would he be in if he got pulled over with it in his possession? He decided he was better off not knowing. Even so, he made a mental note to take the back roads home.

By the time she finished, the contents of the basket threatened to overflow the sides and Art placed a hand on top of the pile to keep everything from shifting as they walked to his car.

During the fifteen minute drive home, Madam Prioleau stared straight ahead, her eyes closed, whispering phrases to herself in some foreign language. Art assumed she was rehearsing her spell, but for all he knew, she could be reciting poetry or composing a letter to a friend.

When they were still a block away from the house, she opened her eyes and let out a small gasp.

"We are very close, yes?"

"Yeah, it's just around the corner."

"I feel her darkness. Your wife's spirit is greatly troubled. Very angry, this one."

"Tell me something I don't know." Art turned the corner and guided the car to the driveway. He was relieved to see Missy's car wasn't there; he'd been half-afraid she'd drive back to attend the exorcism of the house. He'd told her no, he'd rather she be safe in case anything went wrong. But Missy had a stubborn streak. Not as bad as Catherine's, but bad enough that he wouldn't have been surprised to find her waiting for them to arrive.

Art reached in to pull the basket from the back floor but Madam Prioleau stopped him with a leathery hand.

"You wait. I make things safe." She reached into the basket and withdrew an old one-liter soda bottle filled with a greasy-looking brown liquid.

Moving at a slow but steady pace, Madam Prioleau circled the house, pausing every few feet to take a mouthful of the bottle's contents and then spit it out. After motioning for Art to open the door,

she moved through every room in the house, spraying more of the liquid as she went. Trailing behind her, Art caught definite whiffs of alcohol.

"Okay, good now. You get basket." Madam Prioleau wiped her lips on her sleeve.

"What is that?" Art asked, pointing at the bottle. She held it up.

"Rum and chicken fat. It will prevent your wife from disturbing the spell. But not last long. Hurry. Bring basket to me."

Art did as he was told, grimacing at the thought of how rum and chicken fat must taste. When he returned with the basket, Madam Prioleau told him to place it on the table, light every candle he owned, and then turn off the lights.

With the house darkened, Madam Prioleau was a silhouette in the dining room, her hands moving in rapid fashion as she poured fluids and powders into a large wooden bowl she'd brought with her. Bigger pieces of things went in, too, and she stopped every now and then to crush one of them with a stone mortar. While she mixed, she mumbled more indecipherable words.

Just when it seemed like she might go on combining ingredients forever, Madam Prioleau held up the bowl and began speaking in a louder voice. Seated on the couch, Art felt something move the room, an unseen energy that crept over him with icy feet and left the hairs on his arms standing straight up. The atmosphere grew heavier, the air gaining mass until it seemed as thick as a humid day in Florida, only without the moisture. Madam Prioleau dipped her fingers into the bowl and flicked liquid left and right while she shuffled from the dining room to the kitchen, still reciting her spell.

A vile stench assaulted Art, a smell so rancid he had to pull his shirt over his face, and even then the pungent funk snaked its way into his nose and throat. The reek grew stronger with each handful of potion Madam Prioleau threw into the air, until he thought he might vomit.

Something crashed down the hall. Art tried to stand, but he found himself pinned down by the weight of the atmosphere.

Beneath the TV, DVD cases rattled and shook on their shelves. One of them slid free and shot across the room, burying itself in the sofa cushion next to Art. Two more flew past, spinning and whining and missing his head by inches. He tried again to get off the couch, gripping the sofa's edge and pushing as hard as he could with his arms and legs. Once more his muscles proved no match for the supernatural force filling the room, but he did manage to slide off the cushion and fall to the floor. A second later, three DVDs embedded themselves right where he'd been sitting.

"Begone!" Madam Prioleau's shout came from somewhere deep in the house, followed by a series of words in her native tongue. In response, the rest of the DVDs took off from their resting places. The sounds of glass and plastic shattering told him there'd be a helluva mess to clean.

If he survived.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator door opened and slammed closed over and over, creating a racket so loud it drowned out Madam Prioleau's chanting. Cabinet doors and drawers released their contents, adding to the din. A large carving knife thudded into the floor next to Art's hand, a full inch of the blade disappearing into the wood. Unable to do more than tilt his head back and forth, Art's fear and anger found release in his voice.

"Begone, you crazy bitch!" he cried. He had no idea if adding his voice to the spell would make a difference; he only knew it made him feel better. "Get the fuck out of my house, Catherine! Leave us the fuck alone!"

The coffee table by his head levitated up and he immediately regretted his words. He tried to move his arms over his head, but they were only halfway there when the table came crashing down.

It landed across his back, and the only thing that saved him from a broken spine was the legs striking the floor first and absorbing most of the impact. Still, when the heavy wood and glass snapped in half, it felt like a truck hitting him from behind. The air exploded from his lungs, leaving him wheezing and seeing spots as he fought to draw a breath.

Every light bulb burst at once, filling the house with miniature detonations. A violent wind swept through the room, blowing out the candles and tumbling lamps from the end tables.

Then the manifestations stopped and the oppressive weight on Art's body disappeared. Air rushed back into his chest and he let it fill him, sucking in the life-giving oxygen in great, heaving gasps. When his vision returned to normal and the world stopped spinning around him, he pushed himself to his feet and called out for Madam Prioleau.

"In here," she responded, her voice sounding as weak as he felt. He staggered through the debris on the floor and found her in Connor's bedroom, sprawled across his mattress, which lay half off the bed.

"Is it…is it over?" Art leaned against the doorframe, afraid of what her answer might be. If this was only the beginning of the spell…

Madam Prioleau looked up and gave him a feeble smile.

"Can you not feel the difference?" She raised a hand and motioned it in a clumsy circle. "The evil is gone from this place."

Art righted Connor's desk chair from where it had fallen and lowered himself onto it with a sigh. The house did feel different, cleaner somehow, but he had no idea if it was because Catherine's presence was truly gone or because there was nothing supernatural happening at the moment.

"She'll stay gone?" he asked.

Madam Prioleau stood up with more energy than a woman her age should have, especially after what she'd just been through.

"Not to be worrying. I send spirit away, it stay away. No ghost, no more. Now, take me home. *Wheel of Fortune* starts in half hour."

Art looked around at the disaster area that was his house and couldn't help but laugh. She'd driven out a ghost, destroyed thousands of dollars in furniture and belongings, and all the diminutive psychic cared about was her game show.

So who am I to keep her from it?

He pulled his keys from his pocket.

I've got my house back and my family is safe.

It's time to start living.

☠☠☠

Art waited three days before bringing Missy and Connor home, just to make sure Catherine wasn't coming back.

It took a cleaning service two of those days to remove all the broken glass and scrub away the soda and food smeared across the kitchen floor. In the meantime, Art spent every waking moment putting furniture back into place, patching and painting the holes in the walls, and replacing all the things Catherine had destroyed. New dishes sat in the cupboards, the refrigerator was fully stocked, and all the lights had bulbs.

And in all that time, there'd not been the slightest hint of anything supernatural happening.

"Art, you did a fantastic job!" Missy turned and hugged him. Connor paid no attention to the new paint or furniture and ran straight for his room, where he turned on his Xbox. Art shook his head. *As long as there's video games and a TV, the kid probably doesn't care where we live.*

"Thank you, my dear," Art said, affecting a thick southern drawl. "And in honor of our new freedom, tonight we shall dine on…pizza." He held up his phone.

Missy laughed. “No time to cook anything, huh?” She hugged him again, and added a long, tender kiss. Then she leaned back and regarded him with a serious expression.

“What?” he asked.

“Is it really over? Is she gone for good?”

He nodded. “That’s what Madam Prioleau says, and I believe her. I’ve been sleeping here for three nights and nothing’s happened. No weird noises, no lights exploding, no television going on by itself. Ding dong, the witch is finally dead.”

He sat on the couch and pulled Missy down next to him, but she avoided his embrace and frowned at him.

“Don’t talk like that. She was your wife.”

“And your sister,” he said. “But we both know what she turned into. And I for one am glad that thing is gone forever.”

“Maybe she had a good reason.” Missy chewed on her lower lip, a habit she’d developed not long after Catherine started haunting them.

“What?” It was Art’s turn to frown. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Ignore me. I’m just feeling a little guilty, that’s all. In a way, it’s like losing Catherine all over again, only this time it’s our fault. We sent her away.”

“And good fucking riddance.” Art took Missy’s hands in his. “Stop feeling guilty. We moved past that a long time ago, because there was no one to blame but Catherine for what she did. And it’s the same now. We didn’t turn her into a psycho ghost anymore than we forced her off that cliff or put her paranoid delusions in her head. There was something wrong inside her, and it got worse after she died. End of story.”

“End of story.” She attempted a smile. “I like that. Close the book and start a new one.”

"That's the spirit!" He pulled her hands up and kissed them. "I've got an idea. Instead of takeout, let's celebrate. We'll put on our best sneakers and head to Carmello's. Connor can still get pizza and you can I can enjoy some real food and a glass of wine."

"You sure know how to treat a girl!" She gave him a big kiss and stood up. "I'll go change. You pry Connor from his video game."

For the first time in weeks, Art watched Missy walk down the hall and his thoughts were on sex instead of her safety.

From now on, we live a normal life.

He couldn't imagine anything better.

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One week after ridding the house of Catherine's ghost, Art found himself home alone again, although this time for purely mundane reasons. Connor was spending his Saturday night at a friend's house and Missy had the nine p.m. to five a.m. shift the next four days. She'd gone in a couple of hours early to catch up on paperwork. Or so she said. Art had a funny feeling in his stomach that she needed to use a computer where he couldn't see her, which could only mean one thing.

She was checking out wedding dresses. Or rings. Something to do with weddings, anyhow. She'd been dropping hints for a few days, things like "Once we're married we can…" and "I hear Hawaii is a great place to honeymoon."

Subtle hints.

And the fact that hearing them didn't cause his stomach to convulse made him smile, because it meant he was ready, too. That Catherine hadn't ruined him on marriage.

As much as he knew Missy wanted him to bring the subject up—or propose—he felt he owed Connor the courtesy of talking about it first. Not that he expected any problems from the boy. It was just a guy thing.

He'd intended to do it that night, until Kelli Reutermann called to ask if Connor could spend the night with her twins, Randy and Roger. Art didn't hesitate in saying yes, despite looking forward to a "guy's night." After what they'd been through the past few months, Connor deserved some fun.

So after dropping his son off at the Reutermann's and picking up take out Chinese for himself, he ended up watching an old movie and heading to bed early.

Only he couldn't fall asleep.

He'd been having sleeping problems ever since they moved back into the house, jumping at the slightest sounds despite knowing in his head that they had no reason to worry anymore. He'd tried combating the insomnia with bad television: *Ancient Aliens, Seinfeld* reruns, late night talk shows. Nothing worked. He'd drift off, only to start awake when the air conditioner kicked on or ice cubes clattered in the freezer.

After a few nights like that, he'd been practically a walking zombie, his eyes threatening to close anytime he wasn't actively doing something, like arresting a suspect or cooking dinner. Not a big deal if you were watching TV or reading a magazine in the break room; another thing entirely if you were at your desk preparing a report or behind the wheel of a squad car watching for speeders.

Which was why the previous night he'd resorted to taking two Advil PMs, which never failed to put him out, in order to get a full night's sleep. And it had worked. In the morning, he'd felt reasonably refreshed and human again.

Now, lying in bed and watching a half-drunk alien conspiracy expert mumbling about reptilians living among humans, he gave in and shook out two of the sleep aids from the bottle next to the bed. Better to be a little groggy in the morning than exhausted all day.

Unaware he'd passed from dozing to full sleep, Art found himself walking a dark, ominous road, where the only light came from a full moon half-hidden by a forest of tall, dead trees. Skeletal branches

reached into the sky, seeming to plead for life to return. No cars disturbed the empty night, and the cracked and pitted surface served as definitive evidence of a road rarely traveled.

The sensation of danger lurking in the dark grew stronger with each step. Art glanced frequently from side to side, alert for anything that might be waiting to prey on a lone traveler. The deathly silence unnerved him; the only sounds were his own breathing and the crunch of his shoes on dirt and stone.

He walked and walked, with no sensation of time. The moon never changed position, the sky never lightened. So he had no way of telling how far he'd gone, or how long he'd been on the road, when a new sound broke the hush.

A slow, steady thumping.

Art stopped and tried to determine where it came from. He turned in a slow circle, but the acoustics of the road and woods fought him, refusing to give any clues.

He tried to identify the noise. *Thump… Thump… Thump.* The deliberate, reverberating beat created an unwanted picture in his head, a giant alien heart pumping sluggishly inside a sleeping beast, a beast that might awaken at any moment.

The sound gained strength, as if somehow the hidden creature was drawing closer. Or growing larger. His imagination turned it from a heart inside a sleeping giant to an enormous heart all on its own, a colossal mutant organ sliding through the forest, leaving a trail of blood and acid in its wake.

With no idea where the monster was, Art took off at a run in the same direction he'd been walking. Still the malevolent thumping grew louder, until it seemed to come from all sides at once.

Thump… Thump… THUMP!

Art came awake, sitting up in bed and gasping for air. Under the influence of the pills, it took him several seconds to realize he'd escaped his dream.

And yet he could still hear the thumping.

His first thought was *Catherine's back!* But why was she outside?

Thump… thump… thump

There was something knocking at the door.

His brain still muddy from sleep, he tried to make sense of what was happening.

Thumping. First it was not as loud, now it's louder.

Front door, back door?

Someone knocking at the back door always made more noise; the back door was hollow metal instead of solid wood, and the kitchen tended to act like an echo chamber, with noises bouncing off the tiles and doubling in volume.

He swung his feet out of bed, his fear turning to anger. Was that all this was, some asshole knocking at the door and then going around to the kitchen when no one answered? He glanced at his clock. A little before midnight. No wonder he felt so loopy. He'd only been asleep a couple of hours; the pills he'd taken were still in his system.

Thump… thump… thump

"Shit." Probably some stupid drunk at the wrong house. Anyone he knew would either call on the phone or ring the bell if they were trying to reach him in an emergency. He grabbed his robe and cursed again. A drunk or a teenage prank. Well, it didn't matter. Somebody was going to get an earful of shit for waking him up.

He was halfway to the kitchen when the noise stopped. He paused, waiting for it to start up again, or return to the front door. When the house remained silent, he flicked on the kitchen light and peered out through the window in the door.

No one stood on the porch.

Whoever it was realized they were at the wrong house. Most likely it was true, but Art still went to each of the kitchen windows to

check the rest of the back yard, in case the late night visitor had passed out. Or there were kids waiting to toss eggs or rocks at the house.

Another thought came to him. What if it was someone he'd arrested, someone who'd found out where he lived? He purposely had an unlisted number, something all cops did as part of keeping their families safe, but it wouldn't be that hard to find out an address, not with all the information available on the web these days.

More cautious now, he turned the lights off and went around the house checking the rest of the windows and doors to make sure everything was locked. As he did, he noticed a hint of something foul in the air, a smell like rotten meat.

Gotta remember to take out the garbage in the morning.

By the time he finished locking down the house, he was wide awake, all the effects from the pills long gone.

With a sigh, he got a beer from the fridge and plopped himself on the couch, flicking through the channels until he found a *Married with Children* rerun.

Might as well wait for Missy to come home.

☠☠☠

Missy Sawyer watched the sign for Eldorado Road go by as she slowly cruised down Fourth Street and almost gave in to the temptation to turn and follow Eldorado down to River Road, and then to her house. Not that she'd actually stop and go inside. Art would be sleeping, and God knew he needed his rest. It was just that despite how calm things had been for the past week, she still harbored a fear Catherine might return. That the psychic's spell would only be a temporary solution.

Catherine was a stubborn, vindictive bitch in life. If any ghost could figure out a way to break a spell, Catherine Stanhope would be the one.

Missy had no idea how much of her worries were based on guilt or just plain fear, and in the end it didn't matter. She had a feeling she'd always be looking over her shoulder for her older sister, always be thinking that tiny noise in the night was Catherine's angry spirit come back to torment them again. That was why she felt tempted to check the house each night she had patrol duty. Just to make sure everything was all right. That Art wasn't dead or injured so badly he couldn't call for help, that Connor wasn't being force-fed his own Game Boy by a demented specter.

As crazy as live Catherine had been, dead Catherine was even worse. How else to explain why she'd tried to hurt Connor? She'd had plenty of reasons to be angry with her husband, hate her sister. More than anyone knew. But her own son? An innocent child? Why?

Missy turned right, putting Eldorado in her rear view mirror.

A question we'll never have an answer for.

The radio squawked to life and she turned the volume up, happy for the distraction.

"…units. Ten-twelve reported on two-sixteen High Street, north from Eldorado. Nearest unit please respond."

Missy hit the brakes. High and Eldorado was only a few blocks from her current position.

And only a couple of miles from my house.

She pushed the thought away. A ten-twelve was code for a possible intruder. Nothing at all to do with the supernatural events they'd been through. While putting the car into a U-turn, she thumbed her shoulder mike. "This is Charlie one-four responding to Code ten-twelve. I'm on Fourth, turning onto Eldorado. ETA two minutes."

"Roger that, one-four. One-one should be near you if you need them."

"Charlie one-one here. Ten blocks away on Lincoln."

"Hang tight, fellas. I'll let you know if I need assistance."

Car one-one was Eddie Tompkins and Derrick McGrath, two officers who'd been on patrol at least ten years. Despite an ever-present need to prove herself as one of only three women on the force, Missy felt glad there'd be dependable backup if something went down. Small town or not, enough bad shit happened on a regular basis that you couldn't be too careful. Not in an age when any kid who wanted a gun could get one and deadly drugs like crack and meth were as common as pot.

With no traffic ahead of her on Eldorado, Missy hit the gas but refrained from using the siren or lights. If there was really an intruder, the last thing she wanted to do was spook him. He might run away, or he could just as easily decide to take a hostage.

Her palms grew sweaty where she gripped the wheel, and she cursed the adrenaline coursing through her. Even after six years on the job, she still got that tingling feeling in her gut every time she responded to a call, that mix of fear and excitement that heightened her senses and fueled her reflexes, but also made it tough to grip a gun.

When she turned the corner from Eldorado, she caught a glimpse of the first mailbox. Two-twenty-two. Since she was going north, the numbers would be decreasing. Two-sixteen would be—

"Holy shit." Missy skidded to a stop. Two-sixteen was a small brick two-story. All the lights were on. And there was a figure standing on the lawn. A figure Missy instantly recognized.

Catherine.

"It can't be." She opened the door, one hand already unlatching the strap over her service pistol. The figure turned around, caught square by Missy's headlights.

Missy's stomach contracted and her heart rate doubled as she stared at her sister's dead body.

Pieces of Catherine's face had sloughed off, revealing the muscle and bone beneath. Half her nose was gone, leaving a gaping black hole on that side. In the bright light, her eyes were two bluish-white circles

devoid of any pupil or iris. Dirt stains covered her navy burial dress, the very same dress Missy had handed to the funeral director while Art and Connor wept in the other room.

"You're supposed to be gone," Missy said. She spoke to herself, but Catherine responded even though there was no way she could have heard her sister from a distance of several yards.

"You tried to kill me again, Sissy. Tried to send my soul to Hell. But it didn't work. Now I'm going to have my revenge."

Corpse Catherine pointed at Missy, who saw the tips of her fingers were missing, just pieces of bone sticking out from ragged flesh.

Jesus Christ, she dug her way out of her grave.

Missy's hands acted of their own accord, bringing her pistol up in a two-handed shooting grip. She pulled the trigger three times in rapid succession. All three shots hit their target, sending Catherine spinning to one side and then down to the ground.

In the house, curtains moved and someone screamed.

Catherine stood up. Thick, black fluids dripped from the holes in her dress. She smiled, exposing gums rotted away to almost nothing.

Missy fired twice more. Catherine's body jerked and staggered, but didn't fall.

In the distance, a siren howled to life.

"Charlie one-four! Sawyer! Reports of shots fired. Are you on the scene?"

The siren drew rapidly closer. Missy kept both hands on her gun and backed up until she hit the car door.

Bullets won't kill her. Her hands began to shake, and the trembling grew so bad she couldn't keep the gun straight. She gripped it tighter, and even then she knew she'd drop it if she tried to pull the trigger.

"Sawyer! Respond! Are you okay? One-one, move it! Sawyer's not responding."

Catherine turned her head towards the siren and Missy took a chance, turning her back on the dead thing that used to be her sister and ducking around the door to regain the safety of the car. She put it drive, intending to run Catherine over. Maybe it wouldn't kill her, but she wouldn't be much danger with a car parked on top of her.

Except when Missy looked out the windshield, Catherine no longer stood there.

"Hell!" She threw the car in park and twisted around in her seat, checking all the windows for any sign of movement.

The lawn was empty.

"…—er! I repeat, Sawyer, do you copy?"

Still checking the area around the car, Missy reached up and thumbed her mike.

"Sawyer here. I'm okay. Shots were fired by me at suspect who…escaped."

"Roger. Stay on scene, one-four. One-one is on its way." There was relief in the duty officer's voice; with assurance of her safety, it was back-to-business, for the air at least.

Missy leaned back in her seat, her pulse slowing a bit with the immediate danger gone.

How could Catherine be alive? And where could she have…?

"No." There was only one place Catherine would go.

Art.

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The ring of the phone brought Art instantly awake. He sat straight up on the couch, heart pounding, unaware for a moment of where he

was or how he'd gotten there. The second ring brought him back to his senses.

Living room. Couldn't sleep. Must've dozed off watching TV.

He glanced at the cable box while the phone rang for a third time. Not even one-thirty yet. The icy hand of fear gripped him. No one ever called in the middle of the night unless it was bad news.

Missy. He recognized the number on the caller ID as he picked up the phone, and felt his unease grow worse.

"Hello?"

"She's back! Get out of the house! Catherine's back!"

"What?" He stood up, remembering the knocking at the doors earlier. *No, that couldn't have been her. She'd have just been inside, like before.* "Slow down. What happened?"

"I saw her. On the street. She spoke to me. Art, she's dead but she was right there." Missy's voice was approaching hysterical.

"You saw her? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm goddamned sure! I fired five shots into her goddamned chest! Then the next second, she was gone. You and Connor have to get out. She's coming for you."

"We're leaving now. I'll meet you at the station." Art clicked off the phone and then cursed.

Connor was at his friend's house. What if Catherine went there first?

Art shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed his keys. Connor first, then the station. He'd call Missy once he had Connor safe in the car.

The Reutermanns lived across town, on Oakwood and Carlisle. No way Catherine could get there before him.

Ten minutes ago you'd have said there's no way she could be walking in someone's yard.

"Shit."

He had the siren going and his grill lights flashing before he even left the driveway.

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Fifteen minutes after receiving Missy's frantic call, Art pulled away from the Reutermann's house, leaving a very confused Kelli and Jason Reutermann standing on their porch. He'd phoned them on his way over, apologizing for waking them and saying there'd been a minor family emergency and he had to leave town for a couple of days with Connor and Missy to be with a sick relative. It bothered him to lie, especially when Kelli offered to watch Connor until he and Missy got back. He felt like a jerk turning her down, but better that than putting an innocent family in harm's way just because his insane wife had apparently decided to come back from the dead and didn't care who she hurt.

Yeah, try explaining that to Kelli and Jason. They'd never let their kids play with Connor again.

He arrived at the station and stuck a half-awake Connor in the training room, where he could watch TV and hopefully fall back to sleep. Thanks to increasingly unreliable babysitters, it wasn't the first time a cop had parked a kid in there for a couple of hours. Captain Ruiz tended to turn a blind eye, especially after she'd had to do it herself.

Missy came in a few minutes later, her face ashen and her eyes wild. Just seeing her like that made Art wish Catherine would show up right then, so he could choke the undead life out of her for what she'd done to Missy and Connor.

"I'll be right there," Missy said as she went past. He nodded, knowing exactly where she was headed. She'd fired her weapon; there'd be a statement to give and a report to fill out. "Be right there" was cop speak for "See you in an hour or two."

Which was fine. They were all safe. Undead or not, Catherine wouldn't be attacking them in a police station. She'd be blown to bits if she tried. Which might not be such a bad thing. Except how would he explain her being there in the first place?

With a confused but sleepy Connor settled in, and a cup of hot, bitter coffee in his hand, Art took a few minutes to sit and think.

Where had Catherine's body come from and how had it come back to life? Madam Prioleau had assured them she was gone for good, that…

Madam Prioleau. For Christ's sake, he had an expert on the supernatural right in his contacts list, and he hadn't thought to call her yet. After shutting the door so no one would hear his conversation, he pulled up her number and hit Send.

The phone rang several times before a groggy voice answered.

"Hello?"

"This is Art Stanhope. She's back. Only this time, she's not a ghost. What the hell happened?"

A sharp intake of breath answered his question. When there were no further sounds, Art worried that maybe the old woman had passed out. Or hung up on him. He was getting ready to say something when Madam Prioleau spoke.

"Did you say your wife is not a ghost?" This time the voice held no hints of sleep. "Please. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I didn't see her. But Missy did. Only a few blocks from my house. She says she shot Catherine several times, and nothing happened. Then Catherine disappeared. That's all know. The police are still questioning Missy so I haven't had a chance to talk to her."

"This is not good."

"Not good? Thanks for stating the obvious. You said she was gone forever."

"Yes, her ghost. But this…if your woman is right, this is being something different. I must see you. Both of you. Tomorrow, nine o'clock. You get me, bring me to your house. Do not go there without me. Goodnight."

The red disconnect button flashed, letting Art know Madam Prioleau had hung up.

"Dammit!" He resisted the urge to call the psychic back. What good would it do? She'd given him the one thing he needed to know until he saw her.

"Do not go there without me."

Great. Looks like it's back to the hotel tonight.

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As it turned out, they never made it to the hotel. By the time Missy gave her statement—three times, to three different people, including the shift commander—and wrote up her report, it was already close to four a.m. Rather than wake Connor, who'd fallen asleep on a leather-wrapped bench, Art picked up coffee and donuts for the entire overnight shift and then he and Missy took seats in the training room where they could keep an eye on Connor and finally talk about what had happened.

"What did you tell them?" Art asked once they were alone. Even more than he wanted to know the details, he had to know what she'd said so he'd be prepared in case he got brought in for questioning later on.

Missy raised one eyebrow and stared at him with bloodshot eyes. Dark smudges below them magnified the exhausted, shocked expression she'd worn since arriving at the station.

"I told them the truth, or at least what I could of it. I answered a call about a possible intruder. There was a woman in dark clothes on the lawn, she came at me in a threatening manner with a weapon. I told her to stop but she didn't. So I fired. She went down, then got up and

ran. I fired again but missed. I heard on the radio that backup was on the way. I waited for them to arrive and we looked for her but didn't find her."

"A weapon?"

"I might have exaggerated that part." She gave him a tired smile. "My official explanation for why she didn't go down was either she had on a vest or she was zonked on drugs. I had to say that, 'cause I hit her at least three times so there's bound to be trace on the scene."

"And you're sure it was Catherine?"

"I know my own sister, even though she looked like an extra from *The Walking Dead*." Missy downed half her coffee and took a bite of donut before continuing in a softer voice. "It was her, Art. She looked…she looked like she'd just dug herself out of her grave."

"That's—" Art stopped himself. He'd been about to say it was impossible, but who knew what the hell was impossible anymore?

"There's one way to find out." He stood up.

Missy frowned. "How?"

"I'm going to her grave. If it hasn't been disturbed, we'll know this is just another kind of haunting, and that's why the bullets didn't stop her. If it's been dug up, well…maybe Madam Prioleau can explain it."

"I'm going with you." Missy rose but Art stopped her with a gentle push on the shoulder.

"No. Stay with Connor, in case he wakes up. If anyone asks, I ran to the store for something."

He bent down and kissed her forehead. When he stood, she grabbed his arm.

"Be careful. She…she said she wants revenge."

"I don't care what she wants. We're going to end this if I have to burn her to ashes myself."

Missy watched Art leave the room and wiped a tear from her cheek.

She had a nasty feeling that getting rid of Catherine a second time wasn't going to be as easy as before.

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Art arrived at Eternal Rest Cemetery just as the sun peeked over the horizon, painting the finely-manicured grounds with a golden light that did nothing to improve his mood. The gates were already open, and he drove to Catherine's grave as fast as the narrow, curving road allowed. From a distance, the grave appeared as green and neat as its neighbors, but Art hiked over to it anyhow.

Catherine's plot sat in an area devoid of trees. Morning sun turned dew drops into sparkling crystals. The perfectly-mown grass showed no signs of disturbance. Art walked a circle around the grave, examining every inch of the ground, but saw nothing. He was about to head back to his car when he caught a hint of a foul odor. He paused and took a deep breath. It was there, faint but definite, lurking beneath the more pleasurable smells of flowers and summer grass.

An odor of decay, of rot. Like meat gone bad in a trash can, or a dead cat under the porch.

A queasy sensation came alive in Art's stomach, and with it, a picture in his head.

Catherine's dead, decomposing corpse lying just beneath the grass, poised like a trap door spider, waiting for him to take just another step or two closer so it could spring up from its hiding place, clamp its bony hands around his legs, and drag him down into the earth, where it would make a meal out of him. Yellowed teeth carving out hunks of flesh. Leathery tongue lapping up his blood.

"No!" Art shook his head. Letting his imagination get away from him was the last thing he could afford to do. If they were being hunted

by a supernatural creature, he needed to stay level-headed. Treat it like an investigation. Step-by-step.

Okay. So what's the protocol for the living dead?

Only one person knows that. He checked his phone. Still almost three hours until he had to meet Madam Prioleau. But his father would be up and about. Jeremy Stanhope was a classic early to bed, early to rise kind of guy. Always had been, unless he'd had a night shift. Then look out; a tired Jeremy was not a pleasant thing.

We can't bring Connor to the house while Catherine's on the loose. And I might need Missy with me if things go bad; two guns are better than one.

So what do I say?

He sure as hell couldn't tell his father the truth. The old man had about as much tolerance for "supernatural drivel" as he did for criminals or politicians.

Termites. He could say they'd found termites in the house and it needed to be tented for a couple of days. He and Missy would stay at a hotel, but they figured it would be better for Connor to spend some time with his grandfather.

Perfect.

Not that he relished calling his father, but at least with Catherine gone, they'd begun a sort of healing process. Missy helped in that respect, too. The old man had always held a grudging respect for her, partly because she'd done well as a cop and partly because she didn't have her sister's abrasive personality. He hadn't been exactly thrilled when they told him they were dating—said it was "goddamned weird to date your dead wife's sister"—but he'd never bitched about her the way he had about Catherine.

Art opened his contacts list on his phone and then stared at his father's number for several seconds before touching the dial button. *Let's hope he doesn't have his bullshit radar turned on today.*

"Hello, son."

Even the tiny speaker of the cell phone couldn't mask the chill in Jeremy Stanhope's voice.

Good morning to you, too.

"Hi, Dad. Listen, I need a favor…"

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After dropping Connor off at his father's, Art and Missy picked up Madam Prioleau. She was waiting on her porch, dressed in the same outfit as the last time, which made Art wonder if she habitually wore it whenever she dealt with the supernatural, or if plain and gray was just her style.

"We go to your house," she said, buckling her seat belt. "On way, you tell me everything."

"We already did that."

"You tell me again. From beginning."

By the time Art fought his way through the morning rush hour traffic and pulled up in front of the house, he'd just finished going over all the facts about Catherine's death and the hauntings of Missy's apartment and then his house.

"Not make sense." Madam Prioleau shook her head in a quick, birdlike movement as she climbed the front stairs. "Monstru not possible, unless…"

"I don't understand," Missy said, while Art unlocked the front door. "What's a monstru?"

The psychic entered the living room and turned around to face them. "Monstru. Dead thing. What you saw." She made walking motions with her fingers.

"And these monstru things come from ghosts?"

"No! Monstru come from…" her voice tailed off and she stared past Art and Missy at the door.

"What is it?" Art turned around, half-expecting to see Catherine's reanimated corpse on the front porch. But all he saw was sunshine and an empty street.

"Shhh." Madam Prioleau squinted her eyes and sniffed the air. Following an unseen trail, she moved towards the door then went out onto the porch, where she knelt down and put her nose to the ground. She took several deep inhalations, paused, and repeated the process. When she stood up, she pointed at the ground next to the porch.

"You smell?"

Art and Missy looked at each other. "I don't smell anything," he said. "Do you?" Missy shook her head.

Madam Prioleau frowned and pushed past them. They stood still, watching while she went from room to room, sniffing the air like a bloodhound. Eventually, she reached the back door.

"Come," she said, motioning to them. "Now you smell?"

Art was about to say no when Missy nodded. "I do. Something rotten, like old garbage."

"That's what this is about?" Art rolled his eyes. "I smelled that last night. There's some old meat or something in the trash. I forgot to take it out. I'll do it now."

He opened the lid and froze.

The plastic bag inside was empty.

"Not garbage smells," Madam Prioleau said from behind him. "Dead wife smells." She moved past him and opened the back door. "Here. She stood here. Smell remains, like in bathroom after you flush, yes?"

Art was about to say there was no way Catherine had been at the house while he was there, when he remembered the knocking on the back door.

Had it been her? Risen from the grave and ready to tear his throat out right on his own porch?

But how? The cemetery was miles from the house. He tried to picture her rotting corpse shambling through the streets, reaching the house, crossing the lawn, climbing the stairs, and then leaving again, heading over towards…

"Oh, no. Wait a minute."

"What's wrong?"

Art ignored Missy's question and hurried across the room to the junk drawer that's found in every kitchen, where he pulled out the phone book. The pristine yellow cover showed how infrequently they used it. Why bother, when any phone number was a few swipes away on a cell phone? The phone companies knew it too, which was why new phone books were mostly coupons and ads. But one thing that hadn't changed over the years was the map of the neighborhoods in the front. Art flipped through until he found Eldorado.

"Look." He put the book on the table so Madam Prioleau and Missy could see it. "Here we are. Here's where Missy saw Catherine last night." He slid his finger over two inches, then moved it further. "And here's the cemetery. Notice anything?"

"Oh, my god," Missy said. "It's a straight line."

"The house on Eldorado is right between here and the cemetery. She was here, she knocked on the door, and she left. When you saw her, she wasn't on her way here, she was on her way back to the cemetery."

"That's not the only thing between here and her grave." Missy's voice dropped to a whisper as she touched her finger to the map.

Art looked where she was pointing and his stomach did a sick flip.

My father's house.

"Christ. We have to get over there right now!" Before he could move, Madam Prioleau put a hand on his arm.

"Wait. The monstru cannot walk in the daylight. Besides, how would one such as you stop it?"

One such as *he*? Art opened his mouth to tell the wizened old bat he had enough bullets to stop anything, then shut it again.

What if bullets didn't work? They sure hadn't when Missy unloaded her gun into Catherine's corpse. What then? He'd be left standing there like a helpless idiot while Catherine killed Connor and then came after him.

The sad fact was, he knew as much about stopping the undead as he did ridding his house of a ghost.

In other words, nothing.

"So what do we do?" he asked, taking a seat at the table. The others joined him.

"We must find out the truth of your wife's death."

"Dammit! We've been over this. She drove her goddamned car off the goddamned cliff."

"Maybe," Madam Prioleau said. "But not for suicide. Only murder make monstru."

"Murder?" Art's thoughts spun like tires in mud, trying to grip the impossible. "Are you saying someone killed Catherine?"

The old woman shrugged. "It is only explanation. Ghosts, they can happen with suicide or murder. You tell me suicide, so I drive ghost back into body. Once there, it stay forever. Unless…"

"Unless what?" Missy asked.

"Unless not suicide. Put ghost back into body that was murdered, body comes back. That is how you make monstru. No murder, no monstru."

"This doesn't make sense. Who would—"

"I would."

Art turned at Missy's words. She had her eyes cast down at the table and a terrible look of regret on her face.

"I killed Catherine."

☠☠☠

Now I know how Alice felt.

A tumble into another world, a place where the ordinary didn't exist and the strange became reality. How else to explain what had happened to his life?

Because in the world Art Stanhope had always lived in, ghosts didn't exist, dead wives didn't come back to life, and the woman he loved didn't commit murder.

But that life was gone. He'd left it far behind, crossed a line into a bizzaro world.

A world where Missy sat at the table and poured her story out, the words coming so fast he didn't even have a chance to interrupt.

"I kept out of things for so long. You know I did. Even after…after I knew you didn't love her, that you loved me, I gave you both your space. Because you said you needed to try to work things out. She was your wife. My sister. It wasn't my place to get in the middle of your problems. But you were so miserable. And Connor, it wasn't good for him, either. She wasn't good for him. I knew you'd eventually leave her, but I was afraid a divorce would only make things worse. Custody battles. Visitation rights. Catherine forever trying to turn Connor against you. None of us would ever have a chance for happiness. Not us, not you, not Connor. So when Catherine called me to meet her that night, I figured it was my chance to solve everyone's problems. Catherine always had Xanax in her purse. We had a few drinks, she told me how you'd said it was over. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. When she went to the bathroom, I took two and put them in her drink. Not enough to kill her, but she'd be woozy and probably fall

asleep behind the wheel. And she did. But now…because of me, she's back."

Missy put her head down on her arms and broke into tears.

Madam Prioleau gave one of her birdish nods. "See. Murder."

Something relaxed in Art's chest, an easing of a constriction he hadn't even realized was there. The pressure didn't disappear entirely, but it lessened enough so that he could speak.

"No, it's not. She didn't kill Catherine."

Madam Prioleau frowned and Missy looked up, black mascara lines painting her cheeks in macabre patterns.

"Yes, murder. You heard woman."

Art nodded, part of him happy to deliver good news while another part still tried to comprehend what Missy had done.

"I heard her. But those two pills didn't kill her. They probably didn't help, but Catherine popped them like candy and drank with them all the time. All it did was make her more angry and paranoid. I tried to get her to quit, but she wouldn't. The autopsy said her bloodstream was loaded with the stuff, way more than just two pills worth. Besides, you're forgetting one thing."

Missy shook her head, unable to voice her question.

"The note." Art waited for comprehension to sink in. In the brief pause, he had to time to reflect on how weird it was to be discussing murder and suicide in a bright, sunny kitchen.

My life keeps getting stranger and stranger.

"What is this note?" Madam Prioleau asked.

"Catherine." Missy's voice held equal parts relief and confusion. "She left a suicide note. I forgot about that."

"She planned on driving off that road. That's why there were no skid marks. So drugged or not, she was aware enough to do exactly what she wanted."

Art turned to Madam Prioleau, whose scowl was more intense than before, creating deep lines in the loose skin of her face.

"See? Suicide. Not murder."

The psychic shook her head. "No, cannot be. Only murder creates the monstru. You," she pointed at Missy, "you say she talk about killing her again. About revenge."

It was Missy's turn to frown. "Yes, but there's no way she could have known I put those pills in her drink."

Madam Prioleau shrugged. "Who can say what the dead know? What they see or hear from beyond?"

"Enough talk!" Art slammed his hand on the table, making both women jump. Supernatural revenge, a murderous girlfriend, it was all too much for him and his emotions boiled over, anger and frustration erupting before he could stop them. "Forget about what she knows or who killed her. I just want to know how to fucking stop her."

Missy's lips tightened to a thin line. Art controlled the urge to shout at her, too. She wasn't the person he'd thought she was, and even if she hadn't killed Catherine, she'd tried. He didn't know if he could ever get over that, ever trust her. But he wasn't going to get into it in front of a stranger.

"Is important, though." Madam Prioleau's voice remained quiet and steady despite the tension around her. "In order to stop monstru, need blood of the killer."

"What?" Art couldn't believe what he'd heard. "Why can't we just blow her up or chop her to pieces?"

"This is not scary movie, *Domnu* Stanhope. You cannot burn the monstru, cannot chop her." The psychic made karate motions with her hand. "If you do not kill monstru the right way, it comes back again the next night. And the next. It never stops until those it hates are dead. Only one spell can stop a monstru, and blood is needed."

"But Missy didn't kill her. So how is her blood going to help?"

"Your wife believes her sister killed her. That is what brought her back. Spell will work."

"I'll do it."

Art turned to Missy. Makeup and tears soiled her face. Dark circles rested beneath her eyes. Her hair was a tangled mess from running her hands through it. At any other time, he'd have gone to her, put his arms around her, told her he loved her.

Now he couldn't look at her without feeling betrayed.

At the same time, though, he couldn't just let her rush blindly into something that could be dangerous.

"You don't even know what she wants you to do. What if she needs all your blood? Or has to cut off a finger or something?"

"I'll still do it." Missy crossed her arms over her chest. "This is all my fault. Everything. I've ruined our lives. If I have a chance to make things better for you and Connor, I'm going to do it."

"No fingers," Madam Prioleau said, before Art could argue more. "Just some blood. Little cut, like so." She ran one finger across the palm of her other hand.

Art stared at Missy and she stared back. He recognized the look on her face. There'd be no talking her out of it.

"Fine." He turned to Madam Prioleau. "What do we need to do?"

☠☠☠

Missy couldn't remember ever feeling so low. The last few hours had been a personal hell for her, one that grew worse with each passing minute. Each time the cut on her hand throbbed, it reminded her of how she'd destroyed everything good in her life. Living with the guilt of killing her sister had been one thing; she'd accepted that burden from the moment she let Catherine walk out of the bar and get behind the wheel. A police officer committing murder, a sin on her soul that would come back to haunt her one day. All worth it to free Art and Connor

from the evil infecting their lives. She'd always intended to take that particular shame with her to the grave. No one else ever need share the weight of it.

Except now Art knew. And that knowledge had changed him and his feelings for her, just like she'd known it would the moment she revealed her secret. He'd spent the entire day either ignoring her or staring at her with a look she couldn't bear to see on his face. Coldness radiated from him, creating a barrier that prevented her from approaching.

She wanted to scream at him, tell him she did it for him and Connor, beg him to talk to her or shout at her or even slap her. Any kind of reaction at all. Just stop giving her that look, the one filled with disappointment and hate and revulsion.

She'd tried once, not long after Madam Prioleau made her use a kitchen knife to cut a long, shallow line across her palm. Afterwards, with a towel wrapped around her hand to stanch the bleeding, she'd moved to where Art sat immobile on the couch. Before she could say anything, he'd glanced up at her with hard eyes and told her they'd talk when everything was over, but for now just leave him the hell alone.

Since then, she'd been seated at the kitchen table, alternating between watching Madam Prioleau prepare the ingredients of her spell and casting furtive glances at Art, in the hopes she might catch him looking at her with something other than repugnance.

So far, that hadn't happened.

Madam Prioleau's spell turned out to be relatively simple. She'd told Art to collect a bunch of weapons—guns and knives—and place them on the table. Then she'd dabbed some of Missy's blood on each blade and bullet.

"Without the blood, weapons have no effect," the psychic explained. The rest of her spell seemed to consist of mixing an assortment of oils and botanicals that she'd brought with her and

reciting dozens of magical enchantments while anointing herself, Art, and Missy with the surprisingly pleasant-smelling concoction.

Then, she said, it was just a matter of waiting.

"The monstru rises with the night. It will come for the ones who wronged it. You both together here, it will come here. Then, you kill. Bang, bang!" She pointed her finger at Missy and made like she was shooting a gun.

Missy had checked the clock at that point, and held back a groan.

Still five hours until nightfall.

Five hours stuck in a house with a grumpy old woman and a man who presently couldn't stand the sight of her.

As she'd imagined, time hadn't just passed slowly, it crawled on hands and knees, moving forward in grudging increments like a child desperate to avoid a bath on a Sunday night.

Finally, the daylight began to dim. Madam Prioleau, who'd moved to the love seat and dozed off an hour earlier, snapped awake.

"Not long now. Sun is setting."

Art gave a dull nod and continued staring into space.

Missy silently cursed the sluggish passage of time. She wished there was something to do, anything. But the weapons were laid out—pistols and knives for her and Art—the doors were unlocked so Catherine wouldn't find her way in blocked, and redolent oils had already dried to a sticky film on everyone's skin.

The only option left was pacing the floors, and under the circumstances she figured it would only get on everyone's nerves.

So instead she sat as motionless and silent as her companions, with only her dark, depressing thoughts for company. Until she realized the shadows outside had given way to full night. She looked at the clock and the numbers gave her heart a jolt.

Eight fifty-three.

She'd zoned out and never even noticed.

"Shouldn't—" Missy had to stop and clear her throat after hours of not speaking. "Shouldn't she be here by now? It's been dark for a while."

Madam Prioleau shrugged. "No telling when she come. But she will. Monstru drawn to enemy like moth to flame."

On the couch, Art roused himself. "I think I'll call Connor and say goodnight before…" He didn't finish the sentence. His voice sounded as dull as his face had been throughout the day, and Missy hoped he hadn't lost his desire to fight. They'd need him if they were going to survive.

"Hi, Dad."

Missy split her attention between listening to the conversation and listening for noises at the doors. How had she drifted off like that? With all three of them in their own worlds, Catherine could have walked in and slaughtered them before they had a chance to pick up a weapon. Not good. Not good at all, if they wanted to see the morning.

"No, everything's fine. The hotel is nice. How about there? What? What's Connor complaining about?"

Something moved by the kitchen window. Missy rose from her seat, but it was only a shadow cast by a passing car. She sat down again.

"Well, maybe something spilled. Have Connor check. He likes helping. Okay. Yeah, put him on and I'll say goodnight."

A feeling of unease filled Missy. Her heart refused to slow after the false alarm of the shadow. What was it, though?

"You be a good boy and help your grandpa. And stop teasing him about having an old nose. Goodnight, kid. Love you."

"Everything's okay?" The words came out automatically, before Missy remembered Art wasn't speaking to her. He answered, though, and she felt a glimmer of hope that maybe the ice around his heart might thaw after all.

"Yeah. He's getting ready for bed. My dad says he's been complaining that the kitchen smells, even though they took out the garbage earlier. He keeps saying…"

Art's voice trailed off and his eyes grew wide. At the same time, Missy's heart jumped as her brain made the connection.

"There's a smell in the kitchen?"

"Shit! Catherine!"

Madam Prioleau sat up. "We must go now!"

Art grabbed two pistols and his keys. "I'll drive."

Missy paused just long enough to collect a couple of knives and her guns and then she followed them out to the car. Art had it in gear and moving down the driveway before she finished closing her door.

"Why would she go after Connor first?" Art asked as he tossed Missy his cell. She immediately scrolled to the last number called and hit redial.

In the back seat, Madam Prioleau shook her head. "Don't know. Not make sense."

"Dammit!" Missy closed the connection and immediately hit redial again. "Now there's no answer."

In response, Art turned on his grill lights and siren and pressed down harder on the gas.

Missy listened to the answering message come on and cursed again.

Jesus, help us get there in time.

☠☠☠

Art blinked his eyes as he drove, fighting to keep tears at bay. The only sound in his head was the thudding of his own pulse, which eclipsed the siren, the roar of the car's engine, and Missy's non-stop attempts to get hold of his father.

We have to get there in time. He couldn't lose Connor, not after everything they'd been through.

He took the corner to his father's street at forty miles an hour, the car careening across the road and banging off the far curb before straightening out. Madam Prioleau cried out in the back as she bounced against her door. She'd barely regained her balance when Art slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop, tossing her forward into his seat. He was out of the car and running for the door, Missy two steps behind him, before the aged psychic finished releasing her seat belt.

"Wait!" Madam Prioleau waved at them. "This house is not protected yet."

Art ignored her, his fear ratcheting up a notch at the sight of his father's front door sitting partially open.

"Connor!" he shouted, drawing his gun and increasing his speed. He struck the wood with his shoulder, knocking the door the rest of the way open.

The stench of rotten flesh hit him at the same time something came down on his arm, knocking the gun from his hand. He had a glimpse of a dark figure and then a heavy force slammed into him, sent him stumbling across his father's tiny living room. He collided with a chair and fell over it, landing on his hands and knees.

He lifted his head and saw his dead wife for the first time.

Catherine looked every bit as horrible as Missy had described. Gray flesh sloughed from her face, revealing large patches of bone. Shriveled eyes stared at him from black sockets. Shrunken, crusty lips were pulled back, revealing a gray lump that wriggled behind yellowed teeth. Death and decay rolled off her in foul waves, poisoning every breath he drew.

"Hello, Art. Nice of you to drop by." Her words whistled through her teeth, adding a hissing sibilance, so they came out as *"Nisssse of you to sssstop by."*

"Fuck you. Where's Connor?" Art pushed himself up and drew his second pistol.

"Back here!" Missy called out from somewhere deeper in the house. "They're okay."

Art smiled. "Then it's time to say goodbye, bitch."

Catherine took a step forward, raising hands almost completely free of flesh.

Art pulled the trigger three times, the shots deafening in the small space. Catherine's body bucked left and right as all three rounds struck home. The bullets tore through her rotting form, splattering ooze and embalming fluids across the walls and carpet.

Catherine paused, and then let out a gurgling, hissing laugh. "Didn't my whore of a sister tell you? You can't kill what's already dead."

Art fired again, three more rounds. Two into her chest and one that ripped a piece of her neck away, exposing the ringed tube of her trachea.

She kept coming at him.

"Shit!" Art moved to his right, putting the old, scarred coffee table between him and the rotting corpse. Catherine followed, moving faster than Art expected for something in her condition.

"Monstru!" Behind Catherine, Madam Prioleau's diminutive figure looked no more dangerous than a child. But when she shook a vial of liquid onto the Catherine's back, it had an instant effect.

Catherine froze in place, mouth open, arms outstretched.

"Hurry," Madam Prioleau told Art. "That will only hold it for a short while."

Art wasted no time. He got to his feet and approached Catherine, placed the barrel against her temple. Up close, the stink of her was a physical thing, threatening to double him over and drag the contents of

his stomach out. Bits of skin and hair littered her shoulders, evidence that her decomposition hadn't stopped.

"Let's see how you do when I blow your skull to bits."

His finger tightened on the trigger and then in the next instant bright lights filled his vision and a burning pain exploded in his chest. The room went dim and spun around him, and then something hard struck the back of his head. A loud ringing filled his ears. Through it, he dimly heard a sound like wood snapping and then someone screaming. Another voice shouted his name but it was so far away, miles away, and he knew it wouldn't reach him in time to save him. He was falling over the cliff, down, down into blackness, into the place where—

"Art!"

Missy's voice. Closer. Somewhere in the dark. But where…?

House. Connor. Catherine.

He realized his eyes were closed. Opened them.

And wished he hadn't.

Catherine's horrific visage loomed over him, long, yellowish strands of drool hanging from her gaping, lipless mouth. Art lifted his hands. He'd lost his other gun. His ordinary flesh wouldn't stand a chance against Catherine's bony, dagger-like fingers driven by her supernatural fury, but he had no choice. Couldn't let her get Connor.

A series of gunshots erupted right behind him, each thunderous blast a hammer to his already aching head. Catherine's body disappeared. He pushed himself up and saw she'd been thrown backwards several feet by the force of the gunfire.

"Move your ass, Art! C'mon!"

He turned. Missy stood in the hall, her hands wrapped around a long-barreled revolver that he recognized as his father's old .44 Colt Anaconda, a gun with enough stopping power to put down a bear.

Madam Prioleau stood next to her, cradling one arm against her chest, a look of intense pain on her face.

Despite a gut-wrenching nausea brought on by the incessant pounding in his brain, Art got to his feet and staggered towards Missy, who kept the revolver trained on Catherine the whole time. She motioned for him to move past her. He tapped Madam Prioleau on the shoulder, indicating she should follow him. She flinched and muttered a curse, moving her injured arm away from his hand.

Missy shouted something to him that he only caught part of, something about "patio," and he headed towards the back door, hoping he'd heard correctly. He stumbled outside and found his father and Connor there, crouched behind the picnic table they'd turned on its side. As soon as he knelt down with them, Connor hugged him tight.

"Hey, it's okay," Art said. His words sounded muffled and warped, but better than before, indicating his hearing was returning.

"What in the seven hells is going on?" Jeremy Stanhope asked.

"I can't explain it," Art said.

"Why is mommy back?" Connor was crying, his tears glistening in the motion lights mounted on the back of the house. "She's supposed to be dead."

Missy and Madam Prioleau came through the back door at that moment, saving Art from questions he had no answers for.

"She's right behind us," Missy said. "Why aren't the bullets working?"

Madam Prioleau shook her head and groaned. From what Art could tell, her wrist was badly broken. It sat at an odd angle and had already swollen to twice its normal size and turned a purplish-red color.

"Spell…spell should work," she mumbled. Between her pain and the bright lights, her face looked as dead as Catherine's. "Always work."

"Well, it's not. Any ideas?" Missy glanced at Art.

Art glanced around the yard. It wasn't the place he'd have chosen for an escape. Or a standoff. Like his own yard, a ten-foot-high cement wall marked out the property line. To the left and right were houses, and in the back was a sharp slope that led down to the river. The only way out of the back yard was through the house, which meant they were trapped unless they could get around Catherine somehow.

"Weapons?" He'd lost both his guns in the house, leaving him with only a four-shot pistol in his ankle holster, which he quickly drew.

"This," Missy held up the Colt, "and a knife."

"Nothing," added Jeremy. "That…thing caught us by surprise just as we were getting ready for bed. Now, will you tell me what in the goddamn hell is going on?"

"It's Catherine," Art said, while he looked around the yard for anything they could use to hold the monster off until the police arrived. He couldn't hear sirens yet, but with all the shots they'd fired, it wouldn't be long.

"It's my fault." Missy's eyes never left the back door. "I poisoned her, and somehow her corpse came back to life. Now it wants revenge on all of us."

Jeremy opened his mouth to say something else, but never had the chance. The back door flew off its hinges and crashed onto the cement of the patio. Catherine, her burial clothes ragged and torn from the bullets she'd taken, stepped into the yard. Both of her eyes were gone, yet she still stared right at her prey.

"No esssscape now." Somehow she managed to smile, even with only remnants of lips, the remaining pieces of her face pulled away to show her bared teeth.

Connor moaned and buried his head against Art's chest. Missy fired again, two shots and then the gun clicked empty. As before, the bullets sent Catherine back a few steps but otherwise didn't seem to have any effect.

"That'sss the lassst time you do that, bitch!" Catherine sprinted forward, covering the space between them so fast Art never had a chance to move. She threw the table to the side and backhanded Missy, who tumbled over and lay still. Jeremy leapt up and rammed Catherine with his shoulder, putting all of his two-hundred pounds into his attack.

Catherine didn't even flinch.

She gripped her old father-in-law by the neck with one hand. With her other, she raked skeletal fingers down his chest and abdomen. Blood flew in all directions and Jeremy cried out in pain.

He was still screaming when she tossed him into the air, a crimson spray following him like a comet's tail as he flew over Art and crashed to the grass beyond the patio.

"Run!" Art pushed Connor to one side and dove in the other direction, hoping Catherine would follow him. She did, reaching him before he had time to get to his knees. Talon-like nails tore through his sweatshirt and dug into the flesh below his shoulders. Art's body went rigid from the pain, his own scream trapped in his throat. For a moment, the world disappeared in a red haze.

When his vision cleared, he was on his back, with Catherine on his chest, her knees pinning his arms down and preventing him from lifting his gun. She placed a gore-soaked finger next to his eye and laughed as he flinched and turned his head away. Foul-smelling spittle landed on his cheek, where it burned like acid.

"Ssssweet hussssband," she said, each word accompanied by a wave of corpse-breath. "You betrayed me."

"No!" The shout came from next to him.

A burst of white light enveloped Art, and Catherine's weight disappeared from his chest. He blinked several times, trying to drive away the purple and red after-images. Something moved next to him, and he turned in time to see Madam Prioleau falling first to her knees and then to her side.

He looked around, but couldn't locate Catherine. Still half-blind, he pushed himself to his feet, and gasped as the pain in his back woke up.

"Missy? Connor?"

"Over here."

Art swung around, orienting himself to their voices. Fighting to retain his balance, he staggered towards the blurry shapes, one of which was waving at him. Drawing closer, he found Missy and Connor huddled on the ground next to his father. Even with his vision murky, Art had no trouble seeing that his father's wounds looked bad. Real bad. The entire front of his shirt was drenched in blood, and the four gaping, jagged tears in his belly looked like bottomless canyons.

"Jesus." Art flopped down next them and took his father's hand. "Dad? Can you hear me?"

Jeremy mumbled something but didn't open his eyes. Art looked at Missy, who shook her head.

"He's out of it. And I don't think we can move him."

"Where's Catherine? There was an explosion…" Art looked around the property. The spots in his vision had faded, but he still couldn't see her.

"She did something." Missy nodded at Madam Prioleau, who lay unmoving in the grass. "Whatever it was, it knocked Catherine clear across the yard." She pointed to a spot in the farthest corner, and Art turned that way, just in time to see Catherine slowly rising to her feet.

A cold, heavy weight settled on Art's shoulders. The burden of the inevitable catching up to him. This was it. They'd run out of options. Nowhere to hide, no way out of the trap they'd put themselves in, no weapons. No last minute magic from Madam Prioleau. Catherine was coming for them, and this time she'd end it.

He put his arms around his family, pulling them close together.

"I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to say more, tell them he loved them, but the words stuck in his throat and turned to tears.

"Me, too." Jeremy's voice caught Art by surprise. His father's eyes were still closed, his words thick with blood and phlegm. "Thought I was doing…a favor. Never expected her…come back."

"Shh, Dad, it's okay. You…wait." Had he heard his father correctly? "What favor? What did you do?"

"Art?"

He held up a hand to Missy and bent down lower, not wanting to miss what his father was saying.

"Never any good for you. Always…told you. Saw her that night. Drunk, over the line. My chance…to help. Hit…wrote the…not supposed to be like this. Supposed to stay dead."

Art froze as the meaning of his father's words sank in.

No. It can't be.

"No. No No NO!" Art pounded his fist on the ground. Now he understood why their bullets hadn't worked.

He pictured it clearly. Jeremy seeing Catherine's car swerving as she fought to control it, her abilities impaired by the drugs Missy had slipped her. He'd have flicked on his grill lights, the ones all auxiliary police officers were required to have. Wasted, Catherine would have pulled over. And then what? Had his father struck her? Or had he found her passed out in her car and just taken advantage of the situation? Either way, it didn't matter. Write a quick suicide note, knowing the water would smear the handwriting. Put the car in neutral, wedge her foot on the gas, drop it into gear…

What had it taken for Jeremy, a firm believer in the law, a cop with a perfect record, to consider murder as the only option for ridding their family of Catherine? And not just Jeremy. Missy too.

Hell, I was the one married to her and I never seriously thought about. They both did it.

And because of that, they were all going to die.

Catherine was closer now. Still moving slow, but the fleshless grin she wore told Art it was to prolong his agony rather than because she was still stunned by Madam Prioleau's metaphysical attack. Catherine raised her hands, bone and nails curved into deadly claws.

I can't let this happen. Can't just sit here and let her butcher us.

Art turned to Missy and kissed her, pressing his lips against hers with all his might. He tasted the salty tang of her tears, an acknowledgement of his goodbye.

"Don't," she said against his cheek as he tried to pull away. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He let go of her and hugged Connor tight, repeated his kiss and his final statement of love. Connor said nothing, just shook his head, unable to look his father in the eye.

His own tears running freely down his cheeks, Art stood up and faced the demon of retribution his wife had become.

As a cop, he'd always told himself he was prepared to die. He didn't relish the idea, but the possibility of it existed every time you responded to a call or walked into a dark building or pulled over a speeding car. He'd believed it too.

Now he knew he'd been lying to himself all those years.

He didn't want to die. He wanted to live, to grow old with Missy, to see Connor graduate college and start a career. There'd been so much in life to look forward to, so much he'd wanted to do.

Now it would all be taken away from him, stolen by something that shouldn't even be possible.

In that instant, Art understood the impossibility of facing death bravely. He was just taking the coward's way out. Dying first so he wouldn't have to watch his family get slaughtered.

"Do it," he told Catherine. He closed his eyes. His body shook so badly he thought he might fall over. He gripped the useless gun in his

hand, but never raised it. Catherine's death-stench wafted over him. An uneasy feeling crept across his skin, telling him she stood mere inches away. He tried not to picture how she would do it, but he couldn't stop the morbid images produced in his brain.

A skeletal hand thrust into his stomach, reaching up to tear out his heart.

Yellowed teeth ripping his throat away, his blood spraying in fountains.

Razor-sharp nails puncturing his eyes and digging deep into his brain.

"Firssst you watch them die."

The words didn't register until Catherine took him by the arms and lifted him. He was still opening his mouth to shout "No!" when she tossed him over the heads of his family.

Art landed on his side several feet behind his father. Something *snapped* inside him and he cried out. Paralyzed by pain, he was forced to endure the ultimate agony, unable to stop Catherine as she approached Missy and Jeremy, one finger pointing back and forth as she toyed with them, an evil game of *Eenie Meenie* to decide who would be her first victim.

Catherine's jaw moved up and down but Art heard nothing except the sound of his own blood roaring in his ears. He forced his arms forward, fingers digging into the earth, each movement sending fiery bolts of agony through his body. He couldn't let his family die, not alone, not like that. Even if there was no way to stop Catherine, at least he would be with them at the end.

Missy shouted something as Catherine picked Jeremy up. Art wanted to shout as well, but he had no breath to spare. Catherine brought her head down towards Jeremy's neck. Jaws open wide, she looked like a laughing skull and out of the blue Art remembered a scene from an old comic book, *Tales from the Crypt* or something like

it, about a corpse rising from the grave to hunt down the people who'd murdered it.

That's—

Art's hand came down on something cold and hard.

A gun.

My gun. He recognized it instantly.

And knew he had one chance to stop Catherine forever. A chance to save his family at the expense of his own heart.

"In order to stop monstru, need blood of the killer."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

Gritting his teeth against the pain, he lifted the gun in both hands and aimed at his father's back. Everything around him disappeared, his view narrowing to a circle that contained his father and the creature about to kill him.

He pulled the trigger.

And the world exploded.

Thunder filled his ears and the gun flew out of his hands. Catherine dropped Jeremy and stumbled back, her arms spread and her skull tilted up to the sky. Her jaw hung open, pieces of Jeremy's flesh still dangling from her teeth. A white glow enveloped her and she let out a horrible shriek, a high-pitched cry of anguish that went on and on and pierced his brain like acid-coated needles. Something *popped* inside his head and warm liquid trickled from his ears.

The white light disappeared and Catherine's body toppled over.

Everything went silent.

Darkness settled over him, a black fog that came down like a weightless blanket.

Art remained on the ground, his body refusing to respond to his command to *get up and move.* He heard a loud hissing, like being

surrounded by televisions all set to empty stations. Gradually, other sounds filtered through. Voices.

"...move?...Art...hear...Connor..."

"Is she...Dad...I..."

Connor. Missy. They're alive.

Catherine!

He opened his eyes, unaware until then that he'd closed them. Missy's face hovered close, covered in blood and bruises.

"Is she…?" He couldn't get the rest of the words out. Missy nodded.

"She's dead. Really dead. You did it."

Dead.

It was over then. He tried to smile.

Darkness returned.

☠☠☠

Staring at his father's coffin, Art couldn't help but think about fate and karma.

Here I am, back again. Putting someone in the ground and feeling guilty as hell about it.

If he raised his eyes and looked beyond the rows of police officers decked out in their uniforms, he could see the section of the cemetery where Catherine's body had been re-interred.

So far, he'd avoided looking that way.

Unlike the days following Catherine's death and burial, Art had no doubts about whether the guilt gnawing at his guts was deserved or not. He'd killed his father, put a bullet straight through him. Sure, he'd done it to stop the hell-creature his father's actions had spawned, a creature who'd have torn all of them to pieces, who'd been in the process of delivering death to his father at that exact moment.

But I was the one who actually did it. Who ended his life. Did he understand what happened? Why I had to do it? Did he hear me say I'm sorry?

Art knew his father understood the consequences of murdering Catherine, at least at the end. He'd confessed. Apologized.

But they'd never told him it was his blood that held the secret to putting Catherine back in the grave.

If he had, would he have willingly sacrificed himself, knowing he was already dying? Knowing there was no other way, nothing else I could do?

Art wanted to believe he would have, but he remembered his own reaction when faced with imminent death. That he'd have done anything to prolong life just a little longer. Even a few more seconds. That wanting to give yourself up to save the people you love, even putting yourself in a situation to do it, was different than actually letting go of life.

Jeremy Stanhope had been a hero while alive. A cop who had no qualms about putting his life on the line. Yet wasn't it possible he'd have wanted Art to shoot him through the arm, or the leg, or anywhere that wasn't fatal?

Missy had said, more than once, that Jeremy would have told Art to shoot if he'd known the truth. That he never knew what killed him, never felt the bullet.

"She was tearing his throat out. All you did was end things quickly for him, save him a lot of pain. And save all our lives in the process."

The guilt rat in Art's guts took another nip and he held back a groan. The truth was, he'd never know the answers to any of his questions, and that the torment of what he'd done would linger on forever, no matter how long he lived.

Hands took his, Connor to his left and Missy to his right. Their love flowed through him, warmed his heart and stilled the hungry animal doing its best to chew a hole in his conscience.

He'd saved them, and they were still a family.

I guess I can live with some guilt.

☠☠☠

He killed you, Jeremy. Your own son. Shot you.

No. Not like that. Not…

He put a bullet in you. He didn't have to.

Yes, yes he did. My blood. Only way to stop you.

Your blood, yes. But he didn't have to kill you.

Yes, he…he did, didn't he? How else…?

How else, indeed, Jeremy. He never stopped to think. None of them did. Not him. Not her.

I…

He killed you, Jeremy. Just like my sister tried to kill me. Never cared about you when you were alive. Put his family before you. Always did. You know that. How does that make you feel?

... Angry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JG Faherty grew up in the haunted Hudson Valley region of New York, and still resides there. Living in an area filled with Revolutionary War battle grounds, two-hundred year-old gravesites, ghosts, haunted roads, and tales of monsters in the woods has provided a rich background for his writing. A life-long fan of horror and dark fiction, JG is the author of five novels, nine novellas, and more than 50 short stories and has been nominated for the prestigious Bram Stoker Award (twice) and the ITW Thriller Award.

You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, jgfaherty-blog.blogspot.com, and www.jgfaherty.com.

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Carnival of Fear

Novellas:

Castle by the Sea
Winterwood
Death Do Us Part
The Nightmare Man
The Nightmare People
The Nightmare World
When September Ends
The Malthusian Correction

Collections:

The Monster Inside
12 Scares for Christmas
Houses of the Unholy
Songs in the Key of Death