

LAMPLIGHT WOODS
FAMILY BUSINESS

by
TIMOTHY SPRAGUE

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timothysprague.com

DEDICATION

To Amanda, my amazing wife. Your loveliness and intelligence are matched only by your incredible patience.

To my children: Indy, Alex, Abby, and Danny. I know that each of you will go on to do amazing things in this life.

To Agatha, my constant companion. You are a Great Dane, and thus you can't read this. Still, you're a good girl. Who's a good girl? You're a good girl.

=1=

“I guess that I’m just not getting why we’re even going,” Sarah stated stubbornly, not bothering to look up from her cell phone.

Michael Dyer wrapped his hands around his glass of water and silently regarded his daughter for a moment. She had said the same thing at least three times during their long drive from California, and each time he hadn’t had much of an answer to give her. He found himself in the same situation now.

“The guy is my father,” he said, realizing just how lame of a reason that was.

“Was,” she corrected.

“Whatever. Was. The guy was my father.”

“That doesn’t mean that you have to be the one to take care of things. You said that you hadn’t spoken to him in a really long time.”

Michael nodded. “Not since we moved out to the coast. You were only six months old at the time, so that’s been, what, a little over sixteen years.”

“So why do you even care?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the waitress picked that moment to bring their food. He sat back slightly as she set his sandwich down in front of him. The waitress seemed extremely disinterested in the entire process, and after presenting Sarah with her waffles the woman turned on her heel and went back

into the kitchen. She did it without a word or even an acknowledgement of their existence.

“I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense to you,” Michael said as he watched grease drip off of the chicken peeking out from the two pieces of bread that formed his sandwich. “Honestly, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to me, either. I just feel like I have an obligation to take care of his funeral arrangements. There isn’t anyone else to do it.”

Sarah set down her cell phone with a shake of her head. “Well, if you decide someday to become a major asshole like he seems to have been, don’t expect me to pick up the tab for your casket.”

He smiled slightly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The chicken sandwich was hardly what could be classified as good, but it was still a better option than the fast food they had been living on the past few days. Michael quickly ate it and turned his attention to the window next to them as Sarah picked at her own food. The diner was located next to a particularly lonely stretch of highway in southern Ohio. The view through the window displayed the parking lot, the road, and a few scraggly trees. There wasn’t very much more to see.

The sky was beginning to fill with storm clouds. There was a quiet rumble of thunder in the distance, and he knew that it wouldn’t be long before the rain arrived. The sight of the thick gray clouds gave him a brief sense of nostalgia. It had been a long time since he had seen a sky like this. Sure, San Diego had its share of storms, but they were different somehow. The weather had more of an oppressive feel here, a

sense that it was not just gathering but actually surrounding you.

They were only a couple of hours from their destination. Most of the trip had involved him paying close attention to his phone's GPS to make sure that they were on the right track, but now they were on highways that he knew well. He wondered if this was supposed to feel like a homecoming. Whether or not it was supposed to, it definitely didn't. There were few things in life that he would have preferred to do less than to return to Lamplight Woods.

To distract himself more than out of some need to, he mentally ran through what needed to be done. He had a meeting with the funeral home director the next day. He had already determined that there wouldn't be a funeral service. It wasn't due to his negative feelings towards his father. He could have gotten past those for a few hours. It was because he knew that his father detested funerals. The thought of having one for him anyway as a final act of spite had briefly appealed to Michael, but he couldn't justify the additional cost just to throw one last barb.

After the preparations for the burial were made, he would need to figure out what to do with the family business. *That* was going to be the most difficult part. He still wasn't sure how he was going to handle that particular issue.

"Um, Dad?" Sarah asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

Michael turned back towards her and found a very different expression on her face. Normally she carried an air of confidence even when she wasn't

truly feeling that way, but now she looked nervous. Almost timid.

“What’s wrong?” he asked sharply.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she quickly assured him with a small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m okay. I was just wondering if, well, since we’re going to be in town anyway...”

She paused and gulped in a deep breath. He had never seen her act like this.

“I was just wondering,” she continued quietly, “if we could visit Mom while we’re here.”

Michael felt like he had been punched in the gut. He hadn’t been expecting that request. A flood of emotions both old and new flooded into him, but he forced them down.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “Yeah, of course we can.”

“Okay,” she said simply. “Thanks.”

Sarah had never known her mother. Not really, anyway. She had only been three months old when Evelyn had died. They hadn’t talked about her much over the years, and when they had the conversations had been short. He got the feeling that his daughter knew how painful it was for him to talk about her mother even after all these years, and she had purposely steered clear of the topic.

He felt a pang of guilt. That was something that needed correcting. Evelyn had been an amazing woman, and her daughter deserved to know all about her. It wouldn’t be an easy conversation to have, but

any pain that it caused him was irrelevant. Sarah had the right to know everything there was to know about her mother.

He looked back out the window. Maybe this trip would end up being a good thing after all. He could take Sarah around to all the places that he and Evelyn had frequented while they were growing up. A few random memories of them as children popped into his head and he couldn't help but smile.

The smile slipped from his lips. There would be time for a trip down memory lane after the business matters were sorted out. Until then, he needed to stay focused on the matter at hand.

The storm ended up holding off for longer than Michael had expected it to. They were less than an hour from town when the rain began to fall. It was a hard downpour, and he turned the wipers up as far as they would go before flipping on the headlights. Even with them on he struggled to see more than a dozen feet in front of them.

It was coming down so hard that each drop sounded like a rock being tossed onto the car. With some reluctance he slowed the car down. He had hoped to get into town before it got dark, but that didn't seem like a realistic goal anymore.

His teeth clacked together as the car tire bounced in and out of another pothole. The backroads they needed to take to reach Lamplight Woods were, to put it mildly, in rough shape. They had never been well maintained, but he didn't remember them being quite this bad.

"This road is shit," Sarah stated bluntly, vocalizing his own internal monologue.

"Language," he chided her absently, gripping the wheel tighter as they hit another hole. "And yes, it's complete shit."

"Is it like this the entire rest of the way?"

"Probably. This part of Ohio doesn't have the kind of money that the areas around major cities do. That means the local towns don't have the budget to keep the roads repaired."

“Wonderful. At least there isn’t much traffic.”

In the last hour they had encountered less than half a dozen other cars, and all of those had been going in the opposite direction. He risked taking his eyes off the road for a split second to glance over at Sarah. He was used to this sense of isolation from having grown up in this part of the world, but her entire life had been spent living in the city. This was a new experience for her, and she seemed a bit uncomfortable with it.

It was time for a distraction.

“It’s kind of hard to make it out through the rain, but do you see that farm over there?” he asked, pointing out her window with one finger.

“Barely,” Sarah replied, turning her head and straining to see.

“That’s the old McKenzie farm. When I was a kid, there was a boy named Franklin that lived there. He was a couple of years older than me. He was struck by lightning three times in a single month.”

She made a face. “There’s no way that’s true.”

“I swear that it is. Three times in one month, and each time he walked away without a scratch on him. There were witnesses during each strike.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I have no idea. It doesn’t seem like it should be, but it happened.”

“That is extraordinarily weird.”

He forced back a smile. There was a hint of excitement in her voice. He had hooked her.

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “The thing is, there’s a lot of weird stories like that around here. Everyone has seen something that they can’t explain, or heard from a family member about something way outside the boundaries of normalcy. Especially in Lamplight Woods.”

Sarah turned towards him. “What do you mean by that?”

“Mean by what?”

“The part about Lamplight Woods. Why does Lamplight Woods have more of these strange stories than other places?”

Michael hesitated before answering. “Lamplight Woods is a small town in the middle of nowhere. It’s isolated by thick woods on all sides. When you’re there, it feels like it’s disconnected from the rest of the world.”

“Okay, but what’s-”

“I’m coming to it,” he interrupted. “When you’re that alone, cut off from the rest of the world, it can weigh on you. You start to see things in the shadows. You begin to wonder if maybe you’re not as alone as you thought you were, and if you’re not, just what is in there with you?”

She considered that for a moment before saying, “So Lamplight Woods is full of nutjobs. Gotcha.”

He couldn't help but laugh. "Not the point that I was getting at, but you're not necessarily wrong, either."

The light was rapidly fading. With the roads being in as rough shape as they were, it became more and more difficult to follow the twists and turns. They fell silent as he concentrated on driving.

He felt the forest before he saw it. He was aware that sensing the presence of a forest wasn't really a thing, but he couldn't deny that it happened. It was like a great invisible weight was pushing against him, an oppressive force radiating towards them from in front of the car.

As they drew closer, he could see the first of the tall trees looming ahead even through the rain and darkness. They were black silhouettes against an even blacker background, barely visible but definitely there. The road straightened out and led directly through towards them.

He saw Sarah shifting in her seat uncomfortably from the corner of his eye. He understood her discomfort, and he even shared it. He sighed. He *really* wished that they had managed to get there before they had run out of daylight.

"Welcome to Lamplight Woods," he muttered under his breath.

=3=

The rain abruptly stopped as they drove down the narrow road leading through the forest. The moon remained behind the clouds, and it was still very dark in the shadows of the trees, but at least Michael was able to see more than a few feet in front of the car. He began to relax a bit. Now that there was more visibility, the path felt more familiar and less threatening.

He had gone down this road in the back of a bus every school day when he was a child. Lamplight Woods was a very small town with a population just over three hundred at its peak, and because of that limited population the school age children were either homeschooled or were shipped to the next town over to attend classes. His father hadn't been interested in having him around all day, and he had felt the same about that particular option, so each morning at six he had trudged out to the designated bus stop at the edge of town.

A sudden urge struck him, and he reached over to put down the driver side window.

"What are you doing? Sarah asked, folding her arms over her chest. "It's freezing out there."

It was, in fact, *not* freezing outside. It was the middle of June, and even after all the rain the air temperature was still in the upper seventies. Much like her mother had been, however, Sarah was almost always cold. He had joked on more than one occasion that she would politely ask for the

thermostat to be turned up just a smidge while being dipped into a volcano.

Michael took a deep breath and sighed in satisfaction. He had always loved the smell of pine trees and ozone after a downpour. The air smelled so clean and welcoming. As he inhaled the fresh air deep into his lungs, he reminded himself that living in Lamplight Woods had its ups and not just its downs.

“Seriously,” Sarah said impatiently. “What are you doing?”

“Come on,” Michael replied with a wave of his hand. “You can’t tell me that smell isn’t amazing.”

“What smell?”

“Open your window and take a deep breath.”

“This is dumb.”

“Humor your old man just this once.”

“I humor you all the time. It’s like a hobby at this point.”

Despite her protests, Sarah did as she had been instructed. At first she recoiled from the wind, but she gathered herself and inhaled. Her eyes opened wide.

“Oh, okay,” she said. “I get it now.”

“I know, right?”

The road continued on straight through the forest for a few miles. There were no side streets or turn offs, just the path leading forward. Seemingly forgetting about her earlier protests regarding putting

the windows down, Sarah leaned up against the passenger door to keep the wind on her face.

They passed a green sign on a metal pole, and Michael began to slow the car down. They were almost in town, but there was something coming up before that. A minute later it came into view, and he pulled over and brought the car to a stop.

“Come on,” he said, taking off his seatbelt and opening the car door.

“What’s going on?” Sarah asked as she followed his example. “Is something wrong?”

“No, everything’s fine. I want to show you something. Grab the flashlight out of the glovebox.”

When they were both out of the car, Michael took the flashlight from her and turned it on. The thin pale beam didn’t illuminate much. It would be enough for what he needed, however. He led the way forward.

Directly ahead of them was a small wooden bridge that spanned over a shallow creek. He stepped onto it and ran his hand over the guardrail. Lamplight Woods only had this one road leading in and out, and he had crossed this particular bridge thousands of times. In a strange way it was like being reunited with an old friend.

“This is Oak River Bridge,” he said, removing his hand from the guardrail.

“It’s not much of a river,” Sarah commented as she looked over the side at the water below.

“It used to be bigger. When I was a kid it was about twice the width and depth that it is now. The

county built a reservoir that siphoned off a lot of the flow when the population of some of the neighboring towns started growing.”

He continued on the bridge until he reached the center. He knelt down and brushed away some of the dirt and grime from one of the posts. It only took a few seconds of searching with the flashlight to find what he was looking for.

“This is what I wanted to show you,” he said, motioning for Sarah to join him.

His daughter silently crossed over to him and knelt down beside him. He watched her face as she stared at the spot on the post that he indicated with his index finger. At first there was only an expression of confusion, but he smiled slightly as it changed into comprehension.

“ES and MD,” she read from the carvings on the post. “Your and Mom’s initials.”

“Yep. Evelyn Stone and Michael Dyer. Your mother carved them here when we were nine. At the time I thought she was crazy and that we were going to get in trouble. Now... Now I think that she knew even though we were just kids.”

Sarah turned towards him. “Knew what?”

“That we were meant to be together.” He stood up and swiped away the sudden moisture from his eyes. “We should get going. The rain might start up again soon.”

The road widened slightly after they crossed the bridge, and the trees gave way to open grass. They

drove less than ten minutes before lights could be seen in the distance. They were coming up to the town itself.

There was a building on the left side of the road that Michael didn't recognize. As they drew closer he saw that it was some kind of clinic or small hospital. He looked at it curiously as they passed by. The structure hadn't been there when they had left Lamplight Woods.

He soon found that it wasn't the only new addition to the town. When they had previously lived there, Lamplight Woods' downtown area had barely qualified as one. It had consisted of a dozen local businesses and the town hall, which had also been used as the offices for the mayor and sheriff. All of it had been contained to a single street.

Now, though, it was more than triple the previous size. Most of the businesses were closed for the night, but a few still had light spilling out of their windows. One of those was the Split Log, a bar that had been there longer than he had been alive. It was good to see that some things hadn't changed.

"From how you described it, I was expecting this place to be smaller," Sarah remarked.

"Yeah, well, so was I," Michael admitted as he looked out the window. "There's a lot more here than there used to be."

"What's that over there?"

He looked in the direction she was pointing.

“Oh, that’s Oak River Falls,” he told her. “You know that creek we just passed over? It wraps all the way around town. A small part of it passes by the town hall and goes down three levels of rock, which creates a tiered waterfall. It’s quite a bit deeper than back at the bridge.”

He pulled the car into a nearby parking lot and they got out once again. He led the way to the edge of the river, being careful not to slip in the grass. The falls were lit up by a series of flood lamps attached to the nearby buildings. The water rushed off the top shelf of rock and flowed down two more drops before splashing into the river below. It wasn’t more than fourteen feet tall, but it was still an impressive sight.

“Can I help you folks?” a voice asked from behind them.

Michael turned around to find a woman standing at the edge of the parking lot. It was hard to make out details in the dim light, but he could see that she was wearing a suit and that a pair of glasses were perched precariously on her nose. Her arms were crossed over her chest.

“We’re fine,” he said, holding up a hand to shield his eyes from the lights. “I’m just showing my daughter the falls.”

“They’re much easier to see during the day,” the woman replied coldly.

The tone of her voice made it very clear what she was actually saying.

“You’re right,” he said slowly. “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Michael motioned for Sarah to follow him as he led the way back to the car. The woman didn’t move as they did so. She just stood there with her arms crossed and watched silently. It wasn’t until he opened the car door that she spoke again.

“We don’t get many tourists in Lamplight Woods,” she commented.

“We’re not tourists,” he replied. “We used to live here.”

The woman seemed less certain of herself. “You did, did you?”

“Yes. My name is Michael Dyer, and this is-”

“Michael Dyer?” she said, cutting him off. “Gerald Dyer’s son?”

“Um, yes, that would be me.”

The woman walked over to him and offered her hand. Thoroughly confused by the entire situation, he accepted it and shook it. Now that she was closer, he found that she was older than he was, probably in her late fifties, with dark hair and high cheekbones. He was sure that he had seen her before, but he couldn’t place where.

“I was sorry to hear about your father’s passing,” the woman told him. “My condolences.”

“Thank you,” Michael mumbled.

“I’m Carol Dilfer, Lamplight Woods’ mayor. I was working late tonight and saw you two pull into the parking lot from my office window. Some of the local drunks occasionally, eh, *relieve* themselves on the falls. I assumed that was what was happening now.”

“No, ma’am,” Sarah said from inside the car. “No pissing in the river for us.”

“Delightful child.” She smoothed the front of her suit jacket. “I still have some work to finish, so I’ll leave you to be on your way.”

“Before we go, would you mind answering a question for me?” Michael asked. “Lamplight Woods has really grown since we moved. What happened?”

The mayor's attitude visibly brightened. "Isn't it wonderful? About, oh, nine years ago or so, a privately owned company called Synthetic Material Research, or SMR for short, came to town. They research and develop new plastics and polymers. I'm proud to say that I had a hand in bringing SMR here, and that I've also been spearheading the town's economic and physical growth."

"I see. Thank you, Mayor Dilfer. Have a good evening."

The mayor turned on her heel and walked back inside the town hall. Michael watched the door for a moment before getting into the car. Sarah made an unpleasant sound as she put on her seatbelt.

"She was friendly," Sarah observed sarcastically.

"You weren't exactly a ray of sunshine yourself," Michael pointed out as he guided the car back onto the street. "We're here for all of five minutes and you're already annoying government officials."

"What can I say? I have a way with people."

They left the downtown area and continued on until they reached a four way stop. Michael took the street to the right and followed it for less than a mile before making yet another right at the next stop. He drove for a few minutes longer before pulling the car into a gravel driveway.

"We're here," he announced.

The driveway belonged to a large two story house. The roof was sloped harshly, and between that and the ancient wooden shutters it gave the entire

structure an unwelcoming facade. A long porch wrapped around the front and side of the building. The driveway continued past the house and to a small detached garage. There were no neighbors, just an unkempt yard and the woods beyond.

Michael told Sarah to wait in the car as he got out. He walked out into the center of the front yard and looked up at the house. He had been thinking about this moment since they had left California. There were a lot of memories tied up in this house, and he hadn't known how he would react to seeing it again after all this time.

What he hadn't even considered was that he might not feel anything as he stood in front of it. It was just an old house, nothing more. He ran a hand over his face. Any power that it had once had over him had died with his father.

He turned his head towards the large wooden sign to the left of the sidewalk leading up to the front door. The house hadn't just been his home. It had also been the family business. His grandfather had opened Forgotten Tales and later passed it onto his father. Now he owned it, and he had no idea what he was going to do with it.

"Are we going inside or what?" Sarah called from the car, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"I am," he called back. "You're going to wait in the car for a few more minutes until I tell you it's okay to come in."

"Why?"

“Because I said so.” He smiled at her before realizing that she probably couldn’t see his face in the dim light. “Also because your grandfather was completely paranoid and I want to make sure that there aren’t any surprises waiting inside.”

He went up the three creaky steps to the porch and fished a set of keys out of his pocket. It had been a long time since he had tossed out the old bent key he had used when he still lived there, but another key had arrived from his father’s attorney a few days before they had left San Diego. He unlocked the door and went inside.

The store was pitch black, and he reached for the lightswitch. He grunted in amusement as the thought crossed his mind that, if this had been a horror movie, the switch wouldn’t have worked. The lights came right on, though, and he squinted against the sudden glow until his eyes adjusted. Once he could see again, he looked around the store for the first time in over a decade and a half.

Forgotten Tales looked almost exactly like Michael remembered it. Every nook and cranny was packed with tables and shelves containing a wide variety of items. Furniture, toys, paintings, collectibles, silverware, decorations, stuffed animals, even an old tuba... If something could possibly be shoved into the store, it probably was.

Some of the items in Forgotten Tales were extremely valuable. Some of them were completely worthless. All of them were for sale for the right price.

He closed the door behind him and turned his head to the right. His favorite part of the shop had always been the large wall of clocks, and he was pleased to see it was still right where it had been. Dozens of the intricate devices, large and small and everything in between, hung from the wall. A number of others were displayed on shelves, and the entire section was flanked by two large grandfather clocks. All of them were in working order, and for a moment he simply stood there listening to the ticking and whirring of gears.

Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, he made his way through the various tables and display cases until he reached the cash register. It sat on top of a glass case that showcased some of the rarer and more expensive items in the store.

He opened the cash register and peered inside. The drawer opened as the register emitted a loud *ding*. There was no money, and he would have been

surprised to have found any there. His father had made sure to empty it each night into the large safe that he kept in his office.

He wasn't looking for money, however. He gripped the drawer with both hands and lifted up until it popped off the hinges. Setting it down on top of the display case, he reached into the hole the drawer had previously occupied and felt around until his fingers touched a small metal object covered in tape. He tore the object free and pulled it out.

It was a key. Unlike the plain one that he had used to unlock the front door, this one was much older and more ornate. The brass felt cool in his hand.

"What does that go to?" Sarah asked from the doorway.

Michael jumped in surprise and smacked his knee against a nearby stool. He swore loudly and gritted his teeth in pain.

"You're supposed to be waiting in the car," he forced out slowly.

"I know, but it's kind of creepy out there. Did you notice how quiet it is outside?"

"We're way out in the country," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but I mean it's *really* quiet. No insect sounds, no birds, no nothing. Just silence."

He rubbed his knee as he watched his daughter walk around the shop. She seemed fascinated by the countless items all around her, and she stopped frequently to examine an object before moving onto

the next. He had to admit that Forgotten Tales looked rather impressive to someone that had never seen it before. Since he had grown up in it he had never had the chance to view it the way that a first time guest would.

“So what does the key go to?” Sarah asked again.

Michael set the key down on the counter and tapped it with one finger. He didn’t answer her as he continued to watch her. He wasn’t trying to be mysterious, but he wasn’t exactly sure how to answer her question.

“Do you remember the conversation we had earlier this evening?” he asked finally.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” she replied as she crossed over to the counter.

“I told you that Lamplight Woods has more than its fair share of strange stories.”

“Oh, right. I remember.”

“Our family... How do I put this? Lamplight Woods' stories are our family’s stories.”

“I’m... not following you.”

“It’s easier to show you than to try to explain it.” He pushed the key across the counter to her. “Go ahead. Take it.”

Sarah looked at him curiously for a moment before she picked up the key. He led her over to a large bookcase and shoved aside a few paperbacks on the third shelf. At the very back was a keyhole.

At his prompting, she inserted the brass key into the hole and turned it. There was an audible click as the lock disengaged. The right side of the bookcase moved forward slightly. He gripped the edge and swung it open on its hidden hinges, revealing another room behind it.

“Your great-grandfather Charles was a big fan of mystery stories,” Michael said. “One of the biggest tropes in those kinds of books is the hidden passage behind the bookcase. When he built his private office he made sure to include one.”

The room beyond the doorway was large, even larger than the store was. The walls were lined with bookcases packed with old hardcover books, and patterned rugs covered the floor. A desk and a heavy leather chair stood at the far side of the room. Display cases with handwritten tags and strange-looking objects were set up at even intervals throughout the chamber.

Michael watched Sarah intently as she took in the study. Her eyes were wide, and the expression on her face was one of disbelief. He smiled slightly as her brow furrowed. She had caught on to the oddest thing about the room quicker than he had thought that she would.

“Wait,” she said in confusion. “How is this...”

She glanced back out into the shop, and her look of disbelief increased. She turned and went back to the front door before disappearing outside. A few minutes later she returned, and her furrowed brow had turned into a full scowl.

She tentatively put one hand through the doorway behind the bookcase. Once she was seemingly satisfied that it was real, she stepped through and went into the study. She quickly walked the length of it until she had reached the desk.

“This isn’t possible,” she said, more to herself than to him. “How is this possible?”

She looked at him accusingly. He raised his hands and shook his head.

“Hey, I’m not the one that made it this way,” he said defensively. “You can thank your great-grandfather for that.”

“But... But it doesn’t make sense. This room can’t be here. When you look at the house from the outside, there’s nothing past the main room.”

“You think that’s crazy? Take a better look at the lamps.”

The study was illuminated by a series of old lamps hanging from metal sconces that were attached to the dark wooden walls. They gave off a warm and friendly orange glow that made the entire room more pleasant and inviting. Sarah walked over to one of the lamps and tilted her head up to examine it closely.

“There are candles inside,” she murmured. “But then...”

“Who lit the candles,” Michael finished for her. “If you look even closer you’ll see that the candles aren’t melting. The flames aren’t burning them down.”

He closed the bookcase behind them and went over to her. He gently put his arm around her

shoulder and led her around the desk. She sat down in the chair and looked up at him in total confusion.

“Sarah, it’s time that you learned a few things about our family,” he told her.

Before Michael could continue, there was an odd sound from behind him. He turned just in time to catch a brief glimpse of something moving, but in the millisecond it took his eyes to focus it was gone. There was another movement, this time at the base of a display case, but once again he was unable to track the source.

“Dad...” Sarah said uneasily.

“It’s okay,” he reassured her. “Just stay in your chair and don’t make any sudden movements.”

He slowly sat down on the floor and crossed his legs. He winced slightly as he did so, a jolt of pain going through the knee that he had bumped a few minutes earlier. Ignoring it, he held out his hand palm up.

“You don’t have to be scared, Mira,” he said to the seemingly empty room. “I know it’s been a long time, but you know me. It’s me, Michael.”

There was an odd sound, a kind of crackling noise like static, and the scent of ozone momentarily filled his nose. Out of nowhere a blue rabbit-like creature appeared on the floor in front of him. He heard Sarah gasp as the creature nervously looked over at her before disappearing and reappearing a few feet further away. He smiled at it.

“It’s really me, Mira,” he assured it. “Go ahead. It’s okay.”

The animal hesitated before moving forward to sniff at his fingers. Its blue fur had a soft glow to it that had always reminded him of a neon sign. Its long bushy tail, more like a raccoon's than a rabbit's, slowly moved back and forth behind it. It tilted its head slightly, being careful not to touch the tiny but also very sharp horn that extended from its forehead.

It closed its eyes and rubbed its face against his hand. His smile widened as he gently pet it, feeling the sensation of a faint electrical current running through his skin. It made a sound that was a combination of a purr and growl.

"It's good to see you again, too," he said.

Mira opened its eyes and turned its head upwards before disappearing again. It reappeared on the edge of the desk. Sarah stared at it without saying a word, and it regarded her the same way. Michael stood up with a grunt.

"Mira, this is my daughter," he said calmly. "Sarah, put your hand out so that it can get your scent."

After a brief hesitation, she slowly moved her hand towards the animal. It reached its neck out and began to sniff at the tips of her fingers, its nose moving rapidly.

"What..." Sarah swallowed hard. "What is it?"

"This is Mira," Michael said. "Mira is the only known Al-mi'raj in the world."

"That really doesn't tell me anything."

“It’s a legendary creature that used to be native to a small island in the Indian Ocean. It’s said that one of them was presented to Alexander the Great after he slew a mighty dragon. There isn’t much known about them. No one even knows if Mira here is male or female.”

Mira had seemed to accept that Sarah was friendly, and it started to rub its face on her hand. She looked up at Michael, and when he nodded encouragingly she started to stroke its fur gently. It suddenly vanished, only to appear less than a second later in her lap. It snuggled in, and she continued to pet it.

“How does it do that?” she asked quietly.

“What, the disappearing act? No clue. The teleportation seems to be both an unconscious defense mechanism as well as a method of transportation. That’s all that I know about it. It came as quite a surprise the first time that it happened. None of the lore says anything about teleporting.”

“It doesn’t bite, does it?”

“Nah, Mira is incredibly friendly. It will sometimes pop in on you when you’re not expecting it, but otherwise it’s harmless.”

Sarah took a deep breath. “I think that I’d very much like to know just what the hell is going on.”

“I would think so. Give me a second to collect my thoughts, okay?”

Michael slowly walked around the room as both Sarah and Mira watched him. He had known that this

conversation was coming the entire trip, but he hadn't been able to figure out how he wanted it to go. It was long and complicated, and he didn't have all the information himself. Most likely no one person did.

"You've heard of the Bermuda Triangle, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," Sarah answered. "It's that place in the ocean where a bunch of ships and planes have gone missing."

"Right. There are some places in the world that are like that, places where weird or mysterious things happen and there's just no explanation for them. Lamplight Woods is one of those places."

He shook his head slightly as he mentally corrected himself. "No, wait, that's not quite right. Lamplight Woods isn't like the Bermuda Triangle or Stonehenge or anywhere else in the world. It's much more than those places. I'm sorry, I know that I'm not making much sense here."

"No," Sarah agreed. "You really aren't."

"Lamplight Woods is like... It's like a lightning rod. Instead of drawing in electricity, though, it draws in the strange and the weird and the impossible. Things happen here on a daily basis that don't happen anywhere else. It's a place where science and magic and everything in between connect together. It's a place where the paranormal is, well, normal."

"Dad, this is sounding crazy."

"Crazier than you petting the mythological teleporting blue electric animal in your lap?"

She pursed her lips. “Fair point.”

“There’s a lot that I can’t just explain to you. There are things that you have to experience yourself to really understand them. I never could have told you about Mira in a way that would have convinced you that I didn’t need to be locked up in an asylum. You had to see it to believe it.”

“Yeah.” She looked down at the animal happily lounging against her. “Okay, so Lamplight Woods is a strange place. I get that. What does that have to do with our family?”

Michael nodded once. “Right, our family. The first thing that you need to know about the Dyers is that our family had nothing to do with making Lamplight Woods the way that it is. It was like this way before we got here and it will probably be like this long after we’re all gone.”

“Good to know that we didn’t break reality or whatever.”

He started to pace. “The Dyers were some of the earliest settlers in this part of Ohio. Our ancestors were with the first group that called Lamplight Woods home. By all accounts there weren’t many problems for a long time. There were certainly reports of strange occurrences, but nothing too severe. It wasn’t until my grandfather, your great-grandfather, was in his twenties that something terrible happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t know the specifics. He didn’t like to talk about what happened, and my dad didn’t like to talk to me about much at all. What I *do* know is that there

was a series of killings, and that the townspeople managed to track down the killer.”

Michael walked over to one of the display cases. Blowing off a bit of dust, he carefully opened the glass door and withdrew a small silver orb about the size of an apple. The silver formed a web-like design around a dark red core.

“This is a psychorondure,” he said, holding it out so that Sarah could see it without needing to get any closer. “When a person directs all of their anger and hate into it, they can use it to transfer those feelings into another person. The killer was using this to drive people temporarily insane. He turned them into killers like himself.

“That’s the thing about Lamplight Woods. It doesn’t discriminate. It brings in everything strange regardless of whether it’s good like Mira or evil like this godforsaken thing.” He sighed as he put the sphere back into the case. “After the psychorondure was discovered and they figured out what it did, the townspeople that had uncovered it knew that it was too dangerous to leave lying around. Despite their best efforts they couldn’t figure out a way to destroy it, so the only thing they could think to do was lock it away where it couldn’t hurt anyone ever again. That’s where Charles Dyer came in. He worked for years to figure out a way to create this room to contain it. Where better than a place outside of space and reality to hide a dangerous object?”

“How did he do it?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know. Grandpa Charles was an amazing man, and his brain just worked in a completely

different way from anyone else's. Over time he brought in more and more of the oddities that surfaced around Lamplight Woods. He was constantly investigating strange phenomena and increasing his bizarre collection. The town came to rely on him as the person to call when something weird happened. It was a responsibility that he took very seriously, and when he passed away that responsibility fell to my father."

"And now your father is dead."

"And now my father is dead," Michael repeated. "Which brings us to the problem I've been mulling over all week. What happens now?"

The burial preparations took less time to make than Michael had thought. There wasn't much that needed to be taken care of since there wasn't going to be a funeral or graveside service, so all he needed to do was sign a few papers and pay for the coffin and plot.

As he was leaving the funeral home, he stopped to take one last look at the casket he had selected. It was simple, little more than a wooden box with handles on the sides. It really wasn't much to look at, but part of him believed it was still more than his father deserved. He shook his head in a fruitless attempt to clear those types of thoughts out of his mind.

Because of Lamplight Woods' small population, there weren't enough deaths per year to support a full-time funeral home. Instead, the local doctor ran it out of a room in his office space. He wasn't sure why, but that struck him as both morbid and amusing. It was like a silent statement about the quality of Lamplight Woods' medical care.

Even though it was barely ten in the morning, the heat was already radiating off of the sidewalk as he walked through downtown. He had forgotten just how bad the humidity in Ohio could get. He felt like he was walking through an invisible swamp.

Sarah had gotten something to drink from a small grocery store while she waited, and she was standing next to the car sipping from it when he arrived.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Fine,” he answered as he dug his keys out of a pocket in his khaki shorts. “Better than I expected. Are you ready to go see your mother?”

She nodded shortly, and they both got into the car. He glanced over at her as he was starting the engine. She was obviously trying to appear calm and collected, but she wasn’t being very successful at it.

She had accepted everything that she had learned the previous night remarkably well. He had expected her to be more skeptical or maybe even resistant, but having seen actual evidence of his claims had made it easier on her. She had even let Mira sleep in bed with her.

Now that they were going to visit her mother’s grave, however, she was much less collected. He turned his attention away from her as he pulled out of the parking space. He knew how she felt. This would be the first time that he was going to see Evelyn since the day she had been buried, and even though there wasn’t a logical reason for it, he was feeling extremely nervous.

It was a short drive to the cemetery. Located just a couple of minutes north of the downtown area, Lamplight Woods Cemetery was home to generations of the town’s residents. Some of the wealthier townfolk had large family tombs, but the majority of the graves consisted of simple stone markers.

He drove slowly over the rough gravel path that ran between the various sections of the cemetery until he reached the far side of the lot. There were very few graves in this section, and it was shaded by a

group of tall trees. He brought the car to a stop and took the keys out of the ignition.

“We’re here,” he announced unnecessarily, not sure what else to say.”

“Can we just wait here for a minute?” Sarah asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Yeah, of course. Take all the time that you need.”

He rolled down the windows so that they didn’t roast in the summer heat and sat back in his seat. He thought about reaching over and taking her hand, but he quickly rejected the idea. She seemed to want to deal with her feelings herself. If she wanted his help or comfort she would ask for it.

He looked out the window. He couldn’t see it from where they were parked, but underneath one of the oak trees was Evelyn’s grave. He closed his eyes. The day that he had lost her had been the worst day of his life, and he hadn’t had any idea how he could possibly go on without her.

He hadn’t had a choice, though. He opened his eyes. There had been Sarah to take care of, and his own pain was irrelevant when measured against that responsibility. It had been hard, but they had managed.

“I’m ready now,” Sarah said as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

They crossed the freshly mowed grass to the stone marker. When Michael had chosen where to have Evelyn buried, he had selected a spot that wasn’t directly next to other graves. He was pleased

to see that was still the case. She rested in a private area underneath a pleasant-looking tree. It wasn't much in the grand scheme of things, but it had been the best that he could manage at the time.

He took a deep breath and looked down at the marker. Evelyn Marie Stone.

"What, um, what's with the inscription?" Sarah asked, her voice shaky.

"The guiding flame in the dark," he said from memory, not bothering to read it. "It was a running joke between us. Well, not so much a joke as... I don't know. Something between us."

He was having a hard time thinking straight through the sudden sadness and weariness that had overtaken him.

"Your mother had the most striking red hair that I've ever seen," he continued after a short pause to collect himself. "It was even redder than yours. She used to joke that she could use it as a signal fire if she was ever lost. A guiding flame in the dark. She was also..."

He trailed off and stared off into the distance. He was so lost in his thoughts that he jumped in surprise when he felt a hand slide into his. Sarah smiled up at him with tears in her eyes.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said.

He smiled back and wiped at his own eyes before kissing her on the top of the head. "She loved you, you know. Holy crap, did she love you. More than anything."

“More than she loved you?” Sarah teased him.

“Oh yeah, and it wasn’t even close. I’m half-convinced that she only kept me around because finding someone else was just too much work.”

They laughed together, and as they did their spirits brightened. Michael looked back at the grave marker, but this time he didn’t feel the same wave of emotion as he had moments earlier. Things had changed.

“I’m getting a little hungry,” he confessed. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” Sarah said with a shrug.

“Let’s go get some food. There has to be some place that offers takeout in all those new businesses downtown. We’ve got a long day of inventory ahead of us at Forgotten Tales.”

“That sounds, erm, fascinating.”

“Yeah, I know it’s boring, but I have to sort out the merchandise that can be sold to the public from the merchandise that will try to eat your face off.”

“Very funny.” She paused. “Wait, you *are* joking, right?”

“Did you see that carved bust of the bald man with the eyepatch? It’s haunted by the spirit of a pirate who-”

He cut himself off. They had been walking back towards the car, and they had been so distracted that they hadn’t seen that a second vehicle had pulled up behind theirs. The woman stepping out of it was the

same woman that they had encountered the previous night.

“Mr. Dyer,” Mayor Carol Dilfer greeted him in a tone that somehow managed to be both pleasant and unpleasant at the same time. “I was wondering if I could have a word with you.”

Michael regarded the mayor silently for a moment. She was once again wearing a business suit, although this one was gray and had a skirt instead of pants. The sun was reflecting off of her glasses.

“You want to have a word... here,” he eventually said.

“It’s a private conversation,” Dilfer replied. “No one else is here. It seems like the perfect place.”

An immediate retort came to mind, but he forced it down and instead said, “Fine, what is it that you want?”

She shot Sarah a look. “This conversation isn’t appropriate for children.”

“Sarah, I’ll be right back.”

Dilfer pointed over to a nearby hill. “That bench should work nicely.”

They walked over to the bench that she had indicated and sat down. Dilfer took off her glasses and tucked them into a pocket inside her suit jacket. She folded her hands on her lap and nodded to herself.

“I’ve been looking into you, Mr. Dyer,” Dilfer said.

“That’s a pretty creepy way to start a conversation,” Michael observed.

She ignored him and continued on. “You’re a forensic consultant in San Diego. What is that, exactly?”

Apparently looking into him didn’t involve a quick Google search, but he kept that to himself. “I offer consulting services for various people and organizations, mostly police departments and law offices. I specialize in reconstructing, examining, and evaluating crime scenes.”

“And you’re good at this?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Very.”

“Hmm.” She tapped the nail of her index finger against her thin lips. “There’s a matter that Lamplight Woods’ sheriff is working on that I would like you to assist with.”

He immediately shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. I’m only in town long enough to bury my father and to get things squared away with Forgotten Tales.”

“I don’t think that you’re quite understanding what I’m telling you. This particular case is something that the Dyer family has traditionally taken part in.”

Michael opened his mouth to respond, but he closed it again as he considered her words. He watched her carefully while he mulled them over. For her part she simply stared back at him expressionlessly. With one sentence she had piqued his interest, and she obviously knew it.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“It’s never good when there are children,” Dilfer said.

“Fatalities?”

She hesitated ever so slightly. “Multiple.”

“Shit.”

Dilfer stood up and reached into her jacket. She produced a business card and handed it to him. He took it after a brief hesitation.

“That’s Sheriff Grant’s office and cell number,” she said. “Get in touch with her and she’ll get you up to speed.”

Michael shook his head. “Like I said, I’m not here to get involved with town issues. I’m just here to close up the family business.”

Dilfer smiled at him, a smile devoid of any warmth. “Mr. Dyer, I pride myself on being able to read people. When I come to a decision about someone, I’m very rarely incorrect. You’ll help.”

He bristled. “You may think that you know me from a quick background check, but you don’t.”

She pointed in the general direction of the grave he had visited. “I don’t have to know you that well. I knew your dearly departed Evelyn. It was years ago, back when I was the store manager at Whitman’s Pharmacy. She had a summer job there.”

Michael looked closer at her. He had thought that she looked familiar when they had first met, but he hadn’t been able to remember where he knew her from.

“She was a good person,” Dilfer said. “She wouldn’t have been with you as long as she was if you were the kind of person to refuse to help when children are dying. Have a good day, Mr. Dyer.”

Michael watched her walk back to her car and drive away. It took him a few moments to realize that he was grinding his teeth. The woman’s haughty nature and arrogant demeanor was extremely annoying. He looked down at the business card she had given him. The worst part was that, in this particular case, she happened to be right.

He turned his head towards Evelyn’s grave. A bit of a breeze had picked up, and it made the leaves and branches of the overhanging tree dance.

“What have you gotten me into this time, Evie?” he asked, making a face.

The wind rustling through the tree almost sounded like laughter.

Michael tried calling both the numbers on the card he had been provided, but both times his call went directly to voicemail. He left a message detailing who he was and why he was calling, making sure to place an emphasis on the fact that the mayor had requested it. He had a lot of experience working with law enforcement officers, and that experience had taught him that many of them weren't too thrilled when an outsider was brought into an active investigation.

He had plenty to do while waiting for a return call. He and Sarah spent the afternoon going through Forgotten Tales' showroom floor to take inventory. Michael logged each item in a notebook as they went, being careful to note the type of item, its location in the store, and if it really was what it seemed to be.

He wasn't surprised to find a number of items in the shop that shouldn't have been for sale. While both he and his father had learned how to identify cursed, possessed, and otherwise special objects, his father had never been good at it. Michael, however, was much more observant and had picked up the skill at a very young age.

"How about this one?" Sarah asked, holding up a candlestick.

"Just a candlestick," he informed her, making a record of it in the notebook. "It's made of silver, and it's extremely rare for objects made of silver to be influenced."

“Sorry, for it to be what?”

“Influenced.” He waved his pencil in the air. “It’s a generic term your great-grandfather used for things that have been unnaturally changed by outside forces. Sort of a catch-all name for haunted objects, possessed people, magic items, and so forth.”

“Gotcha.” She paused. “Is magic really an actual thing?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but it’s extremely rare these days. It was a lot more common before the Industrial Revolution.”

She sighed. “I’m not sure that I’m ever going to get used to all of this. What about this music box?”

“That was owned by Maria Nikolaevna, the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II. She and her family were murdered by Bulsheviks in 1918. If you play the music box on nights with a half moon, you’ll hear the family screaming in horror between the notes.”

Sarah blinked. “Um, so this is *not* supposed to be out here.”

“Nope.”

He took the music box from her and went into the hidden study behind the bookcase. He found a spot on one of the shelves and gently placed the object in the gap. Most of the items that he had removed from the shop were now stored in a pair of cabinets that stood side by side on one wall, but this particular one needed to be displayed. It was a piece of history.

He smiled slightly at an old memory. He had been fascinated by the music box’s history as a child. The

fall of the Nikolaevna family was the event that had led to the famous story of Anastasia, the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II that had supposedly survived the execution of her family and lived her life in exile. It had later been proven that she actually hadn't survived the massacre, but still, it was a good story.

It was also a story that his father had known, and yet the music box had still ended up for sale. The man should have known better. Michael sighed and shook his head. It didn't matter. There was no point in going down that particular road. All that mattered was that things were getting fixed now.

He went back into the shop and closed the bookcase. Just as the lock clicked into place, the front door of the shop opened. For a moment he thought that the location of the hidden door might have been compromised, but he quickly reminded himself that the front door itself would have blocked the view of the bookcase. His grandfather had purposely laid the room out that way.

A woman in a brown and black outfit that he instantly recognized as a sheriff's uniform stepped into the store. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Her long brown hair was tied back in a braid that laid over one shoulder. Her face and arms were freckled. She was fairly short, barely over five feet tall, but there was an air of authority about her. A file folder was tucked under one arm. Her brown eyes focused on him.

"Michael Dyer?" she asked.

"That's me," he confirmed, moving forward to shake her hand. "You must be Sheriff Grant."

She nodded. "Please, call me Maggie. Everybody does. Mayor Dilfer tells me that you can help with a problem that we're having."

"She asked me to, yes. She thought that I could help. Believe me, I'm not trying to step on anyone's toes here."

She smiled and shook her head. "I'm not one of those cops that gets all bristly when a specialist is brought on board, Mr. Dyer."

"Michael."

"Michael it is, then. Is there a place where we can talk?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Right through here."

He led her through a side door and into the kitchen. To the right of the refrigerator was a set of stairs that led down to a landing with the back door before descending further into the basement. Since the storefront took up so much space, the basement had been converted into a living room.

A small couch and chair were set up around a table. Michael sat down on the couch and motioned for the visitor to take the much more comfortable chair. She flopped down with a sigh.

"It's a hot one out there," Maggie commented, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

"It is indeed," he agreed. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"I wouldn't say no to water. I've been out in a field all morning trying to track down a lost cat."

He opened a small minifridge next to the couch and fished out a bottle of water. His father had put the fridge there so that beer was always at hand, but he had cleared out the cans of cheap booze and replaced them with water and soda the previous night.

“I didn’t realize that the sheriff’s office handles loose animals,” Michael said as he handed her the plastic bottle.

“The luxurious life of a small town sheriff,” she replied with a lopsided smile. “Lost pets, blown tires, cars that won’t start... You name it, and it probably falls under my job description. With the town expansion over the last few years we’re getting close to opening some new departments to help handle things, but we’re not quite there yet.”

He eyed the folder that she had set down on the table. “It sounds like you got something a little more interesting than a lost cat.”

She took a long drink before nodding. “I do. Three children, all taken from their bedrooms in the middle of the night and presumed dead.”

His eyes narrowed. “Presumed? The mayor said that there were multiple confirmed fatalities.”

“Nothing confirmed, no. I’m not sure why she would have lied to you about that. It’s a good bet that there will be, though. Take a look for yourself.”

Michael leaned forward and picked up the unlabeled folder. He opened it and looked at the contents. He immediately regretted that decision.

The folder contained a series of photographs. The one on top showed a bedroom that clearly belonged to a young boy. The walls were painted blue, and numerous posters of baseball players lined the walls. A twin bed was pushed up against one corner, and a toy chest rested against its footboard. A three drawer dresser sat in the opposite corner. A small desk was under the room's only window.

The room was wrecked, and nearly every surface was smeared with blood.

"Unpleasant, isn't it?" Maggie asked grimly.

Michael nodded slowly. He ran his eyes over the picture, focusing on a small section before moving onto the next. The mattress was hanging off the side of the bed, and the covers were balled up near the door leading to the hallway. All three drawers had been pulled out of the dresser and tossed to the other side of the room. The toy chest was flipped over, and one of the lid hinges had been pulled completely out of the wood. The desk was still standing, but the right side had been dragged away from the wall.

Blood covered everything. He had seen a lot of crime scenes, but never one where there was this much splatter. It looked less like an attack than someone splashing buckets of gore everywhere.

"That's the most recent one that you're looking at," Maggie informed him. "There have been two others over the past three months. All of them like, well, *that*."

"When did this one take place?" Michael asked.

"A little under three weeks ago."

He winced. "I'm guessing that the crime scene isn't still intact."

She raised an eyebrow. "Actually, that particular one is still tarped off and left the way it was. Billy Wheaton's father died a few years back in a motorcycle accident, and his mother refuses to go back into the house after... Well, you can imagine how she felt after discovering this."

He looked up from the picture. "I need to see it."

"I figured that you would. I've got the keys to the house with me. We can go over now before we run out of daylight."

Michael led the way back up the stairs. As he came around the corner, he saw that Sarah was playing with Mira in the store. The creature turned its head towards him and, apparently seeing the expression on his face, quickly disappeared before Maggie could catch a glimpse of it.

"I need to go out for a bit," he told Sarah, hoping that his tone conveyed just how close they had come to a disaster. "Try not to burn the place down while I'm gone."

"Geez, you set fire to one little house and you never hear the end of it," she joked with an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

"I'll call you on the way back."

Sarah watched the front door close and sighed in relief. Mira had barely managed to disappear before the sheriff had seen it. That had been way too close for comfort.

She walked over to the front window and pulled back the curtain slightly so that she could see out. Her father and the sheriff got into the woman's car, and a moment later they were pulling out of the driveway and onto the road. She had been told that the town mayor had asked, or more accurately *told*, Dad to assist with some sort of criminal investigation, but he hadn't shared any other details. The look on his face as he had left had said louder than words that whatever he was assisting with wasn't pleasant.

Mira reappeared on the counter and squeaked at her.

"You, little thing, almost blew it," Sarah told it with mock sternness. "What would have happened if that lady saw you?"

The creature seemed to consider her question for a moment before it replied with another squeak.

"That's a very good counterpoint. I concede to your obviously superior debate skills."

She laughed and gave Mira a quick scratch on the chin. The tips of her fingers buzzed slightly as they came into contact with the fur. It was a strange sensation, but not an unpleasant one.

She glanced over at the notebook her father had been using to take inventory. There was no point in continuing in his absence. She had no way of knowing which items should stay out for sale and which should be locked away.

She yawned and worked a kink out of her neck. Boredom was quickly creeping in. She went back over to the window and looked outside again. There was nothing out there, just the lawn and empty road. On a whim, she opened the door and stepped outside onto the porch.

“You coming, Mira?” she asked.

There was a static-like crackle, and Mira appeared on her shoulder. The creature barely weighed anything. She looked over at it as best as she could given the awkward angle and smiled at it.

“I thought you might. Come on, let’s go take a look at the rest of this place.”

Not sure where to start, she walked over to the gravel driveway and followed it towards the detached garage. It wasn’t much to look at, just a small building with barely enough room for two cars. The paint was peeling and a number of boards looked like they were rotting. The door was down and there were no windows to look through.

She knelt down and gripped the door’s metal handle. When she tried to pull it up, she found that it wouldn’t budge. She tried again with the same result. It was locked.

“That’s disappointing,” she mumbled, giving the handle one last tug before releasing it.

The house's backyard was large. She was terrible at estimating size and distance, but it was at least a few acres. Beyond the size, though, there wasn't much to it. Just weeds and grass desperately in need of mowing.

She was about to give up and go back inside when she noticed a small building at the far corner of the yard. It was hard to tell from so far away, but it looked like a shed.

"Well, we might as well check it out," she said to Mira. "It's not like I'm in any kind of rush."

The creature made a sound that she took as agreement.

It took quite a while for her to reach the shed. The grass was so tall that she couldn't see the ground below it, and she was tripped up by holes or pieces of debris half a dozen times. To make sure that she didn't fall and hurt herself, she slowed down to barely more than a crawl. She sighed in relief when she finally reached her destination.

The shed was even less impressive up close. It was made out of the same kind of painted wood as the garage. It was just a few inches taller than she was, with a sloped roof that somehow remained attached despite a number of broken nails sticking out of it.

"I think the only thing we're going to find here is tetanus," she observed.

Not really expecting the door to be unlocked, Sarah reached out and pulled on the handle. To her surprise it swung open easily. The hinges were silent

as the door moved. She frowned slightly. With the state of disrepair that the shed was in, why would the hinges be oiled?

She glanced back at Forgotten Tales. There was no point in worrying about some oiled hinges when there was a house with impossible rooms and screaming music boxes sitting within spitting distance. She opened the door all the way and looked inside.

There was nothing there. She examined the inside of the shed closely just in case she was missing something, but there was only dust and dirt. There wasn't anything of interest. Well, it had been worth a shot.

She was starting to close the door when something on the ground caught her eye. There was just a hint of metal sticking out of the dirt. She would have never noticed it if she hadn't been looking at it from the exact angle that she was and the sunlight wasn't right where it needed to be. Mira hopped off her shoulder and watched curiously as she got down on her knees to brush away the dirt.

Her efforts unveiled a metal ring. She tried to lift it with two fingers and found that it was attached to something further under the dirt. She wrapped her hand around it and pulled up. There was a moment of resistance before a hatch opened with a hiss of escaping air.

She pulled the door open as far as it would go. The hole was large enough for a person to enter, and there were stairs leading downward under the earth. It was too dark to see past the first few stairs, so she pulled out her cellphone and turned on the flashlight

app. The pale glow illuminated further down, but she was still unable to see the bottom.

She felt uneasy, and she glanced back at the house. Maybe it was best if she didn't let her curiosity get the better of her.

Mira made the decision for her. It sniffed at the hatch door for a few seconds, its eyes narrowed and its ears flat against its back. With a low growl it disappeared, only to reappear a few steps down into the hole. It repeated the process until it was completely out of sight.

"Damn it!" Sarah bit out as she quickly followed down the stairs.

To Michael's relief, Maggie pulled the car up against the curb and put it into park. She had driven like a bat out of hell, and he was somewhat surprised that they had made it to the crime scene in one piece. He was pretty sure that all four tires had come off the pavement at one point.

He opened the passenger door and stumbled out of the car. He took a deep breath and allowed his nerves to calm down for a few heartbeats before he took in his surroundings. They were in one of the older residential neighborhoods in Lamplight Woods. It was next to a small park that his mother used to bring him to when he was very young, back before the cancer had taken her mere days before he had started first grade.

The house in front of him had been built in the 1920s or 1930s. It was two stories, with a gently sloped brown shingle roof and a smaller version of it just above the front door. Four rectangular windows looked out from each story, two sets of two on each side. Bricks lined the base. A stone path led up to two concrete stairs that in turn led to the door.

While it was an older house, the owner had clearly been taking care of it. The paint didn't look more than a few years old, and there wasn't anything that required more than minor repairs. It was the house of someone that had worked to make it a home.

“I’ve never worked with a consultant before,” Maggie admitted as she came around the side of the car to join him. “How do you want to handle this?”

“I have a process,” Michael told her. “It’s a way that I like to do things so that I can keep everything straight.”

“A man with a plan. Go on.”

“I don’t want you to tell me anything when we go inside. If I ask a question you can answer it, obviously, but otherwise don’t tell me anything.”

“So you don’t want to know anything about the crime scene that you’re investigating.”

He smiled slightly. “Yeah, I know, it sounds counterintuitive, but it lets me come at things with fresh eyes.”

She returned the smile. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that you’re implying that the small town yokel sheriff can’t properly break down a crime scene.”

“Not at all. In fact, I’m counting on you being good at your job. When I’m done with my examination, we’ll compare notes and see where we’re at. Two sets of eyes pick up more than one.”

She nodded. “Agreed. Do you want to start with the boy’s bedroom, or do you want to see the rest of the house first?”

“The bedroom first. We can work our way out from there. Do you happen to have any nitrile gloves?”

“I keep a box in the back seat. I’ll grab it.”

With the small box in hand, she led him through the front door and up the flight of stairs just inside and to the left of the entryway. He followed her to one of the bedrooms, where she lifted the police tape blocking the doorway so that he could duck underneath it. He took two steps through the door and stopped.

The bedroom was just like it had looked in the picture. The furniture, clothes, and toys were in complete disarray around the room. There was even more blood than he had initially believed based on the pictures he had seen. It was everywhere, a thick dry crust that coated the majority of the space.

“The child hasn’t been found yet, you said?” Michael asked as he slowly looked around.

“Not yet,” Maggie replied in a strained voice.

He furrowed his brow. “And the same thing with the two other missing children, right?”

“Correct.”

He turned towards her. “You said that you don’t know why Mayor Dilfer told me that there were confirmed fatalities when there haven’t been any yet. I get the feeling that’s not entirely true.”

She shrugged. “I mean, I don’t have any proof or anything, but Her Royal Highness has been known to stretch the truth when it suits her. My guess is that she thought it would help get you onto the case.”

“What a great mayor that you have here.”

“Oh yeah, she’s absolutely wonderful.” She scratched her chin. “With that said, given the state of this room and the others, I can’t imagine that she’s wrong about these being murders. There’s no way the boy could have survived this much blood loss.”

Michael forced down his annoyance with the mayor and turned his attention back to the matter at hand. Maggie handed him a pair of the nitrile gloves. He pulled the tight blue material over his hands and flexed his fingers to loosen them up.

“This isn’t right,” he muttered.

“No, it’s not,” Maggie agreed. “This kind of thing happening to someone, especially a defenseless kid, is just plain awful.”

“Not that. I mean, yes, it is definitely awful, but that’s not what I meant. This entire crime scene is off.”

“It’s just the way that I found it,” she said firmly.

He shook his head. “I’m not questioning how you’ve handled the scene, Maggie. I’m questioning how any of this happened in the first place.”

He walked to the center of the bedroom and turned around slowly in a circle. He stopped when he had made a full rotation, then looked up at the ceiling and down at the ground. Having confirmed his suspicions he nodded to himself.

“There’s no blood splatter pattern,” he said. “There’s no point of origin, and there’s no central location where the victim would have been located as the blood went outward. There’s just random

splashes of blood thrown everywhere and pools of it all over the place.”

“Which means what?” Maggie asked.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say that this crime scene has been staged.”

“You seem to be saying that you *do* know better.”

He frowned. “It could theoretically be possible for it to be staged, but I just don’t see what the point would be. There are much easier ways to cover up a murder or kidnapping, and for this to have happened at three different houses? I just can’t see it.”

“Hold on there.” She stepped into the bedroom to join him. “You’re saying that there’s a chance these are kidnappings instead of murders?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. All this blood... There’s too much of it. This is way more than an adult’s body holds, and the victims have been children. Since this can’t all be the boy’s, the question becomes if *any* of it is. If it isn’t, or only a small amount of it is, that leads down the path of this being a possible kidnapping.”

“No bodies have been recovered,” she said as she chewed on her lower lip. “I have to say, the possibility of those kids being alive somewhere out there is one I really want to cling onto.”

“There’s no way of knowing for sure one way or another. Not yet, anyway. What’s that?”

Michael had noticed an odd bulge on the wall next to the bed. He went over to it and ran one gloved finger over it. It felt soft and moist, like drywall that

had recently absorbed water. He gently pressed on it and found that there was something behind it.

“That wasn’t there when I was here last,” Maggie informed him.

“Do you have a knife with you?” he asked. “Or maybe a pencil? Anything with a point.”

“Uh, yeah, let’s see.” She searched her pockets. “I’ve got a pen, will that work?”

He took the writing instrument from her and removed the cap. Placing the tip against the spot in the wall, he slowly but firmly pushed against it. The pen broke through the outer layer. He pulled it back out and looked through the hole that it had made. Not believing what he was seeing, he leaned in closer to confirm.

“What is it?” Maggie asked, coming over to stand next to him.

“It’s blood,” Michael replied. “The wall is bleeding.”

The stairs didn't descend into the ground as deeply as Sarah had originally thought. She had only gone down fifteen or twenty feet when she reached the bottom. The angle of the stairs themselves must have blocked the light when she had first peered through the hatch.

She used her phone's flashlight app to take in her surroundings. The room had stone walls and a poured concrete floor. Along one wall stood four large metal sinks. They reminded her of the kind that restaurants used.

On the opposite wall were dozens of large hooks. They were over three feet long, each with a curved razor-sharp tip. The light from her phone reflected off the points. She felt herself shudder. She didn't want to imagine what they were used for.

She stepped off the stairs and onto the concrete. After only a few steps she noticed that the floor gently sloped towards the center of the room. She followed the dip with her eyes and found a drain located in the middle.

Mira was standing at the far end of the room and staring at the wall. As Sarah approached she found that the spot the animal was fixated on was actually a door. It was taller than she was and made of metal. Instead of a knob, it had a locking wheel, the same kind that were normally present on ships.

“Mira,” Sarah called quietly. “Come on, we shouldn’t be-”

The creature disappeared.

“In here,” she finished with a sigh.

She placed a hand on the wheel and paused. Mira hadn’t necessarily gone behind the door. Her father had told her that it could cover at least twenty yards in any direction when it teleported. Maybe it had gone back outside.

There was a tiny muffled squeak from the other side of the door.

“Of course,” she muttered.

She tried to turn the wheel, but it only moved about an inch. She readjusted her grip and put her weight into it. This time it began to turn, sending the grating sound of metal scraping metal echoing around the chamber. There was a heavy thud, and the door opened. Holding her phone in front of her, she stepped over the bottom of the frame and went through the opening.

She was standing inside of a tunnel. There was no concrete here, just wooden beams and a dirt floor. Small bulbs hung from wires running across the ceiling, but none of them gave off any light. She had once taken a tour of a coal mine on a school trip, and she was reminded of that experience as she walked.

It wasn’t a long passage, and she soon arrived at a second door. It was identical to the one that she had just passed through, but this time the wheel spun more easily. She pulled it open and continued on.

The next room wasn't any more pleasant than the first one she had come to. The walls on the left side were lined with steel cages. The bars were thick and close together. Peering through them, she saw that there were chains with manacles attached to the bottom of each cage. The doors stood open. The overhead bulbs were lit here, casting a dim yellowish light over the restraints and filling the corners of the room with shadows.

"Mira," Sarah called out in a voice barely above a whisper. "We need to get the hell out of here."

There was no answer. She turned off the flashlight app and put her phone in her pocket. Moving slowly past the cages, she crossed over to the far wall and yet another door. She turned the wheel and opened it. Being careful to make as little noise as possible, she passed through it.

She was in a narrow corridor, only about six feet wide. The walls were constructed entirely of metal, with large bolts attaching them from floor to ceiling. She reached out and touched the wall to her left. It was cool to the touch, and she could feel a soft vibration running through it.

Standing at the end of the hallway was Mira. The animal was staring at the left wall intently. The fur on its back was raised, and the soft glow that always radiated from it was brighter than it normally was. Its teeth were bared.

Something was very wrong. Sarah moved towards it slowly. On her left were doors made of the same metal as the hallway. Each door had a small panel with a latch. It looked like they could be slid to

one side so that someone could look through into the room beyond.

She wasn't sure if it was because of morbid curiosity or some survival instinct telling her that she needed to know what she was dealing with, but she went over to the first door. She gripped the latch and slid the panel to the side. Steeling herself, she looked through the hole.

The room inside was dark, with no overhead lights like were present in the hallway. She thought about using her phone to attempt to see better, but she quickly dismissed the idea. If there was something concealed in the shadows, it might not be happy with the change in illumination.

The room's floor was moving. It wasn't until she heard a faint dripping noise that she worked out what she was seeing. She was looking at a pool of water.

The liquid began to glow. It was a bright green light that expanded and contracted like a beating heart. Thanks to the light being produced she could see that there wasn't anything else present in the room.

A tiny ball of light separated itself from the mass and rose out of the water. It hovered above the surface, drifting lazily from side to side. Another ball emerged and joined it, and then another. In less than a minute the entire room was filled with the small spheres. It was beautiful.

One of the lights moved over towards here. She held one finger through the hole in the door. The ball landed on it. It felt warm and had no weight to it. She smiled. When she was little, she had been obsessed

with faeries. It had gotten to the point where she had insisted on wearing her Tinkerbell costume to bed. She wondered if this was the real world equivalent of a fairy.

Her awe turned to pain as something hot and sharp jabbed into her finger. She swore and firmly shook the ball of light off of her skin. There was a welt where it had been resting. It had burned her.

The other balls of light were starting to come closer to the door. Pulling her hand back, she quickly slammed the panel closed and put the latch back into place. She took a moment to center herself before moving onto the next door.

She really didn't want to check another room after what had just happened, but the thought of having something behind her that she wasn't aware of was far worse. She opened the panel and peered inside. There was a light inside of this room, a single bulb that was suspended from the ceiling on a wire. Sitting directly underneath it on a rickety wooden chair was an incredibly thin man. Although his back was turned to her, she could still see just how emaciated he was. His long black hair was greasy, and it clung to his naked back. His head was slumped down against his chest. She could hear him whispering, either to her or to himself.

Something about the man set off warning sirens in Sarah's head. She quickly shut the panel and backed away from the door. Her instincts were screaming for her to get as far away as possible.

The third room was filled to the brim with caskets. Each of the coffins was wrapped in heavy chains, and

many of them had been bolted to the floor with thick iron bandings. It was a very strange scene, one which she couldn't begin to explain, but she had no intention of investigating further. She closed the panel and continued on until she came to Mira, reaching the final door in the process.

“I’m hoping that you’ve seen this sort of thing before,” Maggie said as they watched the blood run down out of the hole in the wall and onto the floor.

“I’ve never seen anything remotely like it,” Michael replied.

“Great. I just assumed that you Dyers had run into pretty much everything at one point or another.”

“Nothing like this. There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio.”

“I’m no English major, but I’m pretty sure that Shakespeare didn’t have *this* in mind when he was writing *Hamlet*.”

He snorted. “Probably not.”

He put the pen back into the hole it had punctured and gently pushed it in deeper. The hole widened slightly, and the blood began to flow out at a faster rate. The tip of the pen hit resistance less than two inches in.

At first he assumed that he had hit insulation. The more he moved the pen around, though, the less he thought that was the case. This was firmer, more solid than soaked insulation should be.

“I need to see what’s going on back there,” he said, extracting the pen.

“I’ve got a toolbox in the trunk,” Maggie told him. “I’ll be right back.”

Michael began to look around the rest of the room while he waited. It had been a long time since he had stood in the middle of a paranormal event. He had been hoping that there would be some logical and natural explanation for the pictures he had been shown. He had doubted it, but he had hoped for that all the same.

He picked up a stuffed bear from the floor. It was wearing a shirt with the Cincinnati Reds logo. The left half of it was coated in thick blood. The other half was in remarkably good shape.

His entire childhood had been about preparing him for the unnatural world his family dabbled in. At first the education had seemed like a game. His grandfather had been a kind teacher, and he had put an emphasis on the wonders of the unknown universe while still making sure that his grandson understood the dangerous side of Lamplight Woods.

When Grandpa Charles had passed away, Michael’s father Gerald had taken over his teaching. Something had been broken in the man years earlier, and that something had turned him petty and cruel. He took much of that out on his son.

An old unwelcome memory came back to Michael. He closed his eyes. Even though it had been decades since it happened, he could still smell the odd mixture of tobacco and burning flesh as his father pressed the half-smoked cigar into the back of his right shoulder. He could no longer remember the pain it had caused,

but he doubted that he'd ever forget the wretched smell.

His grandfather had made him feel a sense of responsibility and pride for their family's service to Lamplight Woods. They helped keep people safe and secure, and there was no higher calling than that. His father had replaced those feelings with much worse ones, ones that had led to him abandoning the family business altogether.

He opened his eyes. His father had died from a sudden heart attack. There had been no warning. It had come out of nowhere.

That meant that Gerald Dyer had still been in charge of watching over Lamplight Woods' paranormal occurrences when these children had been taken. The man had accepted the monthly payment the town had given him for his services, and he had enjoyed the tax-free status that Forgotten Tales was given as part of the compensation. In return, he had failed in his duty.

Michael had decided to find a new caretaker for both the town and Forgotten Tales. He and Sarah's lives were back in San Diego, and there were too many bad memories here. He would have to talk with the mayor and probably Maggie about who would be best suited to take things over when they left.

Before he could do that, though, he needed to see this case through. He had to do what his father either couldn't or wouldn't do: give the family of these children answers. Even if those answers ended up being what they feared most, they still deserved them.

“Here we go,” Maggie said as she returned to the room, a toolbox gripped in one hand. “What’s your weapon of choice?”

“A hammer should do it,” Michael answered, pulling himself out of his thoughts.

He took the tool she handed him and went back over to the section of the wall he had been prodding. The bleeding still hadn’t stopped. In fact, it seemed to be coming out even faster.

“You’ll probably want to step back,” he warned the sheriff. “There might be a splash zone.”

Turning the hammer around, he struck the wall with the claws. They dug into the drywall as blood splattered outward from the blow. He adjusted his grip and pulled hard. A piece of the wall broke away and fell to the floor. He had the unpleasant mental image of a scab being stripped from a wound.

Blood drained freely out of the wall now, and it sloshed over his shoes before he could get out of the way. He gritted his teeth and went back to work with the hammer. The drywall was soft and decayed from constant exposure to the moisture. It only took him a few minutes to clear away a large section.

“There’s definitely something back here,” he said as he resisted the urge to wipe the sweat off of his forehead with his blood-covered gloves.

“What is it?” Maggie asked from the doorway.

“I don’t know yet. It’s hard to see through all of... this. Can you see if there’s a bucket or pitcher or

something that can be filled with water so we can rinse this off?"

As she left to find what he had asked for, he went over to the opposite wall and broke hole in it with the hammer. He cleared enough of the drywall away to see that the same thing was happening on this side of the room as well. He watched the blood running out of the new opening while he wracked his brain for any sort of paranormal activity that he had heard of that was even remotely similar to this. Nothing came to mind. Bleeding walls were a rare part of some hauntings, sure, but this was different.

He turned his eyes up towards the ceiling.

He had a suspicion, and there was only one way to find out if it was correct.

Being careful not to slip in the fresh ichor coating the floor, he dragged the small desk chair over to the center of the room. He stood on it and reached up to touch the ceiling. It wasn't a very tall chair, but luckily it wasn't a very high ceiling, either. Bracing himself as best as he could, he struck the plaster with the hammer.

He wasn't expecting such a large piece to come free. He barely ducked out of the way in time as a two foot wide section ripped away and tumbled down to the floor. Blood streamed out like a waterfall.

Maggie came in with a bucket filled with water. Michael got down off the chair, took the bucket from her, and went back to the original opening that he had made. Wiping away the blood as best as he could with his hands, he raised the bucket up and slowly poured its contents into the gap. It didn't clear out as

much as he had hoped, but it was enough to get a better look at what was underneath it.

“What the fuck?” he exclaimed loudly.

“What?” Maggie asked, hurrying over to him.
“What is it?”

“It’s tissue.” He pointed through the hole at the pink mass on the other side of the drywall. “The entire space between this wall and the one behind it is filled with muscle and tissue.”

Sarah stood motionless next to Mira for a long moment. There was an odd sound coming from the animal, a constant low hum in the back of its throat. It sounded both afraid and angry.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, immediately realizing just how silly it was to ask that question in this particular place.

Mira either didn’t hear her or didn’t bother to respond. It just kept growling at the door, its lips pulled back to expose its sharp teeth. She had just viewed the frightening contents of three chambers, but somehow seeing the normally playful creature displaying such raw hatred and fear made her even more afraid..

She turned to the door. It looked the same as the others. Given what she had already seen, there was most likely something terrible being kept behind it. Mira had ignored the other doors and went straight to this one. She had the sinking feeling that meant whatever was beyond it was the worst of all.

She raised her hand towards the sliding panel, but just as she was about to touch it she froze. She glanced back down at Mira. Had the animal sensed a danger and gone to investigate, or had it led her here on purpose?

Taking a deep breath, she slid the panel open and leaned forward to look inside.

The room was dim. There were four exposed lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling, one in each corner. Every square inch of the walls and ceiling were covered in the same metal as the hallway they were standing in.

In the center of the room was a chair. Unlike the one that she had seen in the chamber with the emaciated man, this one was made of metal. Seated on it, with thick chains wrapped around its arms and legs, was the strangest figure that she had ever seen.

He sat perfectly still as he stared straight ahead at the wall. He was wearing a pair of blue jean overalls with a red shirt underneath. Comically oversized black shoes covered his feet, and white gloves did the same for his hands. The most striking feature was his head. It was much too large for his body, and his features were grotesquely exaggerated. His red lips were pulled back in an eternal grin that exposed his huge white teeth. The lidless eyes were a deep blue, and they looked out into space without so much as a twitch. Sarah estimated that he would be roughly four feet tall if he stood up.

He was like a cartoon that had been brought to life. A twisted cartoon dreamed up in the mind of a madman.

His clothes were covered in brown stains. There were similar markings around his mouth as well. She was certain that it was blood that had dried and crusted long ago.

His head turned slightly to face her, and he stared back at her.

Mira's growling grew louder.

The figure's permanent grin grew wider. He tilted his head to one side, reminding her of a curious dog. When she was a small child, she had watched the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland*. The Cheshire Cat, in particular its unnaturally large smile, had scared her to the point that she had needed to sleep in bed with her father for over a week. This grin was worse, and it made her afraid to know what was behind it.

Without any lids his eyes looked like they were nearly bulging out of his skull. They were locked directly on her, and even though she didn't want to she couldn't help but stare back into them. She was locked in place as she gazed in those inhuman eyes.

They were the bluest eyes that she had ever seen. It was like she was looking into two azure sapphires. He was watching her so intently that they shook inside of their sockets. Her head started to feel a bit light, and she felt exhaustion creeping into her body.

Her mind snapped back into focus as she felt an intense pain in her ankle. She gasped and tore her eyes free from the figure to look down. Mira had sunk its teeth into her leg and was biting down. It wasn't hard enough to break the skin, but it still hurt like crazy.

"Mira!" Sarah snapped. "What the hell are you doing?!"

The animal released its grip and looked up at her with a somber expression on its face. It squeaked once and turned its nose towards the door. Her anger quickly dissipated as she understood what it was trying to tell her.

Mira hadn't randomly decided to chew on her. It had done so to break her out of her stupor. Without looking back into the room, she reached up and slid the panel shut. She didn't know what had just happened, but *something* had.

"Let's get out of here," Sarah said in a much more friendly tone.

As she turned to go back out the way that they had come, she heard the rattling of chains from behind the door. She stopped moving and listened intently, her heart hammering in her chest. The jingling of metal stopped as quickly as it had begun.

She slowly backed away further. She could now hear breathing on the other side of the door. It was low and ragged, but it was unmistakably breathing. Despite having clearly been chained to both the chair and floor in the center of the room, the figure was now just a few feet away from her. The only thing separating them was the door.

"Tell Mikey," a slightly muffled and high-pitched voice said, "that I really liked playing with Evie, and I can't wait to play with *you*."

Sarah turned and ran. His laughter echoed off the walls as she hurried back through the underground facility. She only paused long enough to shut and lock each of the heavy doors as she passed through them. Reaching the first room with the sinks and hooks, she nearly slipped on the smooth concrete floor. She caught herself at the last second and bolted up the stairs. Mira appeared inside the shed right before she slammed the hatch shut, and together they crossed the yard.

When they were about halfway back to Forgotten Tales, she began to calm down and slowed her pace. It had been midafternoon when she had first gone down through the hatch. Now the sun was much lower in the sky, and the first shadows of evening had appeared.

Panting and trying to catch her breath, she took out her phone and checked the time. She blinked, not fully comprehending the numbers it presented her. She was sure that she had only been underground for fifteen or twenty minutes at most, but the clock was saying that it had been over two hours.

She turned back towards the closed shed door. It couldn't have been that long. She raised her face towards the sky and once again noted the sun's position.

Could it?

She thought back to the... *thing's* deep blue eyes and shuddered despite the summer heat.

“A lot of people think that your family is just a bunch of lunatics,” Maggie said as she stared back at the house from inside the car. “Most folks believe that you’ve gone off your rockers talking about ghosts and goblins and such. Especially the newer ones, the ones that moved here when SMR opened.”

Michael smiled slightly and nodded. He had heard it all the time when he was growing up. Only a very small portion of Lamplight Woods' population was aware of the role that the Dyer family had been playing for decades. Part of that was due to less and less belief in the paranormal as the years had gone by, but some of it was by design. Knowing what was really happening in the town would cause most people to panic, and it would also bring unwanted attention that could make it harder to do what they needed to. Positioning his family as the local whack jobs meant that they were mostly ignored. The reasoning was sound, but that didn't mean that he hadn't gotten sick of the stares and eye rolls when he was a child.

“I hate to admit it, but I was one of those people,” she continued. “I thought that your dad had a screw loose. He used to come into my dad's bar and rant about some really crazy stuff after he had a few drinks in him.”

“Your dad's bar?” Michael asked curiously. “Wait. Maggie Grant. Your father is Martin Grant, the owner of the Split Log?”

“Sure is. Seventy-four years young and still working the taps. God, I feel like having him pour me an incredibly stiff one right now.”

“I know the feeling.”

She checked her watch. “You know what? Screw it. We’re going to need booze for the conversation we both know that we need to have. You up for that?”

He looked at her with a mixture of amusement and sympathy. “Yeah, sure. Just let me call my daughter to let her know where I’ll be.”

Sarah sounded out of breath when she picked up the phone. She assured him that everything was fine, and that she had just been out for a jog. While he had never been fond of running for exercise himself, she made sure to get a long run in at least twice a week. He told her that he would pick up dinner on the way home before he hung up.

“Everything okay?” Maggie asked as they headed towards downtown.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Just my teenage daughter making me feel like an out of shape old man.”

She made a face. “My wife is constantly doing that to me. Healthy people are the worst.”

Maggie parked her car behind the Split Log in a gravel lot. As Michael understood it, the bar had gotten its name back when Lamplight Woods had been home to a large logging operation called the Ambrose Logging Company. Martin Grant had worked a single day as a wood splitter before realizing that the job wasn’t for him. He had decided

to open a bar to sell alcohol to the other logging company workers. The name of the bar was said to be Martin's constant reminder to himself that he was in the hospitality business for a reason.

Michael had only been inside a handful of times. His father had been a nightly presence in the bar, but he didn't drink much himself. It wasn't out of some revulsion to drinking or even a worry that he might become a barely functioning alcoholic like his father had been. He simply didn't like the taste of most alcoholic beverages.

Maggie led him through the back door of the bar and to a booth in the corner. There weren't many people in the Split Log yet, although he suspected that would change once people got back into town from work. She set down the files and notepads that she was carrying and slid into one side of the booth as he did the same on the opposite side.

An older man wearing a white apron came up to the table and smiled down at Maggie.

"I thought that I raised you better than to drink on the job," the man teased.

"I'm *always* on the job, Pop," she answered with a warm smile. "I have to fit in my vices somewhere. This is Michael Dyer. He's helping me on a case."

He shook Michael's hand. "Dyer, you say? Gerald Dyer's boy?"

"Yes, sir," Michael replied. "How have you been?"

He waved a hand in the air. "Oh, you know, at my age it's a good day as long as you're still above the

ground. That means that I've had a lot of good days so far and that I'm having one now."

"That's a great way to look at things."

"What can I get you, son?"

Michael hesitated. "Just a glass of ice water, please."

"No way are you making me drink alone," Maggie chided him.

He smiled slightly. "Okay, fine."

"I'm guessing that you're not much of a drinker," Martin surmised. "Problem with the bottle or problem with the taste?"

"Taste."

"Good. Your old man... Well, best not to speak ill of the dead. If that's your issue, let me get you a glass of something that I keep behind the bar. It's from a small local brewery, and I guarantee it doesn't taste like the piss that comes out of the taps."

"Pops is a bit of a beer snob," Maggie informed him. "You wouldn't think that a guy who makes his living from serving the beer on tap would be, but there you have it."

"Sure," Michael said with a nod. "I'm up for trying it."

Maggie ordered her drink, one that was much stronger than any beer. Once her father had left, she spread out the documents across the table. She took

a ballpoint pen out of her breast pocket and grabbed one of the notepads. She looked at him expectantly.

“Okay,” she said, “explain to me just what the hell is going on back at that house.”

“I don’t know,” Michael admitted.

She put the pen down. “Well that isn’t helpful in the slightest. I thought that you’re an expert at all of this.”

“I’m an expert in criminal forensics.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” He sat back in his seat. “There’s no such thing as an expert in the paranormal. The people that claim to be are either comen or idiots. Sometimes both.”

“This is extremely disappointing to hear right now.”

“There’s just too much of the unknown out there to ever learn about it all. Every time that you think that you have a handle on how things are supposed to work, a dozen new oddities pop up that send you back to square one.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Michael knew that she was desperate for answers, and he wished that he had some to give. He scratched his chin as he considered the matter.

“Whatever is going on behind those walls is brand new to me,” he said quietly, making sure that Martin couldn’t overhear him. “I *have* heard of walls bleeding, though. It’s a phenomenon usually associated with hauntings.”

“You think this is... ghosts?” Maggie asked slowly.

He raised an eyebrow. “You just saw what you saw and you’re drawing the line at ghosts?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m just having trouble wrapping my mind around all of this. I know that it’s real. I do. It’s just...”

“I get it,” he assured her. “It’s like you have to completely rewire the way that you think.”

She nodded. “Okay, well, we don’t have time for me to get all the way comfortable with this. If there’s even the slightest chance that any of those kids are alive, we have to move fast.”

“Not to mention that we need to stop it before it happens again. The first step is to work out what we’re dealing with.”

“Right.” She picked back up the pen. “So we’re thinking ghosts?”

He looked up at the ceiling as he thought. “I know I just got done saying that bleeding walls are associated with hauntings, but I don’t think this falls into that category. Hauntings tend to be tied to places or objects. Sometimes people. Multiple locations with different people is extremely rare, if not completely unheard of. There’s also the matter of the organic tissue that we’re seeing here. The pieces just don’t fit.”

“So what you’re saying is that we’re looking for something that has some of the same characteristics as a haunting, but also takes things way further.”

“Exactly.”

Sarah didn't hesitate to tell her father what had happened to her when he returned to Forgotten Tales. She had made up a story about having been out jogging when he had called earlier so that he didn't feel the need to leave work, but she was smart enough to know that not filling him in on the events of the afternoon wasn't a good idea. He needed to know about what was going on under the backyard shed, and if he already knew, he could hopefully put her fears to rest.

He listened intently as she spoke, the bags of food he had brought home for dinner forgotten on the kitchen counter. His expression was impossible to read until she reached the part about the deformed cartoon-like figure in the final cell. The blood drained from his face as she described the encounter.

"Did he say anything to you?" her father asked intently. "Tell me whatever he said, no matter how minor it might seem."

"He gave me a message for you," Sarah said, shivering at the memory. "He said to tell you that he had fun playing with Evie, and that he was looking forward to playing with me. Or you. I'm not a hundred percent sure who he meant."

He was silent for a long time, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes glued to the floor. She had never seen him like this. Something was happening that she didn't understand.

“Did you know about that place?” she asked finally.

“No,” he answered, shaking his head slowly and not looking up. “There wasn’t anything out back when I lived here. Dammit, Dad, what the hell were you up to?”

“Do you... do you want to see it?”

Her father raised his head and looked at her. “Neither one of us is going in there until I figure out what’s going on. This is important, Sarah. Promise me that you won’t go back.”

She quickly nodded. “Absolutely. I never want to go back down there again. I wish that I hadn’t in the first place. I couldn’t just leave Mira down there, though. Why did Mira go to that thing’s room?”

“Our family has a... history with it,” he replied. “Look, I know that’s not much of an answer, but I’m going to need you to trust me on this. I promise that I’ll tell you everything later. I just... I just need some time to figure out *how* to have that conversation with you.”

“I don’t understand,” she admitted.

“I know. Can you just give me a couple of days to sort things out? I promise that you’ll understand why when we sit down and talk. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Sarah didn’t sleep well that night. She was extremely tired, but the events of the afternoon kept replaying over and over in her head. Around two in

the morning she gave up and got out of bed, being careful not to wake Mira.

She had been staying in her father's old room while he slept downstairs on the couch. There was a second bedroom in the house, but it had been her grandfather's. Her father's dislike of the man apparently extended to that room as well.

She got up and went over to the window. It looked out over the backyard, but heavy clouds had moved in and she couldn't see far enough to make out the shed. It was out there, though. She could almost feel it.

She shook her head firmly. There was no point in obsessing over it. She picked up her robe from the back of a chair and put it on before sliding her feet into her slippers. Being as quiet as possible, she crossed over to the door and crept out of the room.

The house was dark and silent. Well, *mostly* silent. Sarah could hear the sound of her father's snoring even though he was two floors down from her. She smiled. It sounded like a freight train passing through the building. She couldn't be too hard on him, though. The volume of her own snoring had woken her up on more than one occasion.

Across the hallway from her room was the closed door leading into the one her grandfather had used. Her father had only spoken of him a few times before they had come to Lamplight Woods, and none of those times put the man in a particularly good light. She knew that he had been part of the reason that they had moved to California when she was still a baby, and from reading in between the lines she had

worked out that he had been both physically and mentally abusive towards her father. Beyond that, she didn't know anything about him.

Well, she did now know that he had built a creepy as hell underground bunker beneath the backyard. She wasn't sure what that said about the man, but it probably wasn't good.

There was so much going on that she didn't understand, and she had the gut feeling that at least some of it had to do with her grandfather. Her father hadn't known about the underground facility, and he was now involved in a police investigation. If she was going to get any answers, she was going to have to find them herself. Her grandfather's bedroom was as good a place as any to start.

She walked over to the door and placed her hand on the doorknob before stopping herself. Most of what had happened earlier in the day to her was because she had indulged her curiosity without playing it safe. It felt like she was on the verge of repeating that mistake now.

She glanced towards the stairwell leading down to the first floor. Her father had already gone through the entirety of the house, including her grandfather's bedroom, and he had pointed out a few things that she needed to be careful around. None of those things he had spoken of were located in this bedroom. She was confident that he would have told her if there was something dangerous less than twenty feet from the room she was staying in. That meant that it was safe.

It was faulty logic, and she was well aware of that, but it was enough to convince herself to continue on. She opened the bedroom door and winced at the creaking noise it made as it swung. She listened for a few seconds to make sure that she hadn't woken up her father. His snoring continued unabated. She went into the bedroom before closing the door behind her.

It was pitch black inside, and she felt around the wall next to the door until she found the light switch. She flipped it up and immediately closed her eyes as the overhead light temporarily blinded her. She allowed her eyes to adjust before looking around.

Michael almost fell off the couch as he was startled awake by the sound of his phone ringing. He barely got a hand down to stop himself from rolling off onto the floor. He groped around in the dark for a few seconds before his hand wrapped around the phone. For a brief moment he debated whether to answer it or to throw it out the window.

“Hello?” he managed to get out as he answered it, trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Michael, it’s Maggie,” a woman’s voice said. “I know it’s late, or early, or whatever, but there’s been another one.”

“Another...” The fog lifted, and he sat up on the couch. “Another kid is gone?”

“Yeah. Same thing as the first three. The bedroom is covered in blood, and... Look, the parents and sister are over in the next room so I can’t really talk, but I found that, um, *growth* as well.”

“How long has it been?”

“Less than an hour. I need you to get over here *now*.”

He tossed off his blanket and stood up. “Text me the address. I’m on my way.”

Not wanting to wake Sarah up, he wrote a quick note and taped it to the railing of the stairs so that she

was sure to see it in the morning. He quickly got dressed, splashed some water on his face, and grabbed a drink from the refrigerator. His phone vibrated as it received the address from Maggie. He almost didn't remember to lock the door behind him as he practically flew out the front door towards his car.

He glanced at the time as he pulled up the text message. It was just before three. He shook his head to clear out the remaining cobwebs and backed out of the driveway. He was so distracted by his need to hurry that he didn't notice the light coming from the second story of the house.

As he drove, he reached back behind the passenger seat and felt around as he hoped that he had forgotten to remove the item he was seeking before they had left San Diego. He sighed in relief as his fingers touched canvas. Pulling the black backpack off the floor, he set it onto the passenger seat. Since he was called out to crime scenes at all hours when he was working, he kept a few essential items in the car to make sure that they were always available. It was only through sheer dumb luck that he hadn't remembered to take it out when they had been packing for their trip.

The home he was looking for was located in one of the more remote corners of Lamplight Woods. When he had moved to California, there hadn't been anything in this section of town. He went down a series of newly paved roads that led deep into the woods before arriving at his destination. Two dozen manufactured homes were lined up neatly on each side of the street. They were all nearly identical, and each had a small yard in the front and back. Maggie's

car was parked in front of the fourth one to the right, and he pulled his car up behind hers before parking.

“I kept everything the way it was,” Maggie called from the front porch. “The room is just inside and to the left.”

“I’ll take a look at it later,” Michael replied, grabbing the backpack and putting it onto the car’s hood.

He unzipped the bag and dug around through its contents. Maggie came over with a questioning look on her face but didn’t say anything. Finding what he was looking for, he extracted a flashlight, a spray bottle, and an odd rectangular metal and plastic object. He handed her the flashlight.

“There were no bodies at the scenes,” he explained, zipping up the backpack and slinging it over his shoulder. “They had to have gone somewhere. There’s a chance we can catch up to the child and whoever or whatever’s with them if we hurry.”

“Benjamin,” Maggie said.

“What?”

“The child. His name is Benjamin.”

“Oh. Right. Benjamin. We might be able to stop him from disappearing like the others. Which one is his bedroom window?”

She turned on the flashlight and led him around the structure. She pointed at one of the windows and he hurried over to it.

“What is that?” she asked as he held up the rectangular object.

“It’s an ultraviolet light,” he replied, turning it on and bathing the side of the house in a faint bluish purple glow. “It’s used to detect certain fluids.”

“I’ve never seen one that looks like that before. I was under the impression that UV lights don’t pick up blood.”

He shook his head slightly as he closely examined the siding under the window. “It doesn’t. Blood doesn’t fluoresce. It *does* show other types of body fluids, though. Saliva, urine, semen, that sort of thing. I’ve got something else for the blood.”

He turned off the light and set it down on the ground off to one side. He began to lightly spray the grass underneath the window. Almost immediately it began to glow a soft blue.

“Luminol,” he said. “Normally it takes a bit longer for the blood to start luminescing, but there’s a lot of it. I’m not surprised based on how you described the state of the bedroom.”

They followed the direction the blood trail led in, Michael spraying the ground ahead of them as they walked to make sure they were going the right way. He used as little of the chemical as possible; he wasn’t sure how far the trail would lead them, and this was his only bottle of luminol. If he ran out they would have to hope that the flashlight and ultraviolet light would be enough to continue on.

The trail led away from the manufactured homes and into the woods. Their progress was slowed as

they traversed the difficult terrain. Masses of branches, leaves, and fallen trees forced them to either go over or around them. Michael stumbled a few times and paid for each one with a number of painful scratches.

The amount of blood on the ground began to increase. He held up a hand as he came to a stop. Pointing down at the faintly glowing splatter on the ground, he leaned in so that his lips were almost touching Maggie's ear.

"We're close," he whispered as quietly as he could. "Whoever we're following is slowing down, and the blood here is fresher."

She nodded her understanding and slowly took her gun out of its holster. They continued on at a pace barely above a crawl, trying to make as little noise as possible as the twigs and leaves cracked under their feet. There was no way that they were going to be able to hide their approach, but with any luck their quarry wouldn't hear them until they were as close as possible.

Michael came to a stop as he heard a sound from in front of them. It was a voice, a deep male one, but it was oddly distorted. There was a slight echo, like the voice was being projected out of multiple speakers.

Maggie must have heard it as well. She tapped him on the shoulder and slowly moved past him, the gun gripped in both hands. The barrel was pointed downward, but the expression on her face as she went by him made it clear that she was ready to use it if necessary.

The voice continued to speak, but he couldn't make out any of the words. As he followed Maggie, he realized that it wasn't that he was having trouble understanding the words, but that the speaker was simply rambling nonsense. He turned his head slightly and listened. It didn't seem like random sounds. It was more like a language that he didn't recognize.

Maggie came to a halt. She lowered her gun as her shoulders slumped in relief. He heard her sigh.

"Benjamin Henderson," she said. "Your family is worried sick about you."

Michael walked forward to stand next to Maggie. A young boy of maybe six or seven was sitting on his knees near a tree directly ahead of them, his arms crossed over his chest and his body covered in blood. He was wearing a pair of pajama pants and what had once been a white short-sleeved shirt. His eyes stared at the sheriff blankly as he continued to speak in the strange voice they had heard as they approached.

Maggie started to holster her gun, but Michael touched her hand and shook his head. She gave him a puzzled look but kept the weapon drawn. He knelt down in front of the boy and quickly looked him over. There weren't any cuts or lacerations that he could see. The blood he was covered in wasn't his. Benjamin didn't even seem to notice the brief examination.

Michael set down the backpack and put away the spray bottle and ultraviolet light. He extracted a penlight from one of the side pockets and clicked it on. Benjamin didn't react when he shined the light in the boy's eyes. There wasn't even any dilation of the pupils.

He checked the boy's pulse. It was beating strong and fast. *Too* strong and fast, in fact. It was a wonder that the kid's heart hadn't exploded. He had never felt a pulse that hard and steady before.

"What's wrong with him?" Maggie asked, her voice strained.

“It’s a possession,” Michael answered, slipping the penlight into his pocket and standing up.”

“Um, possessed as in like *Poltergeist*?”

“*Poltergeist* wasn’t about possession. It was about vengeful spirits that attacked a family because their house was built on...” He stopped himself. “Yeah, um, that’s not important right now, is it? Sorry. You’re on the right track.”

“So this boy is being possessed by a ghost.”

He hesitated. “I don’t think it’s a ghost. His body has been taken over by *something*, but I’ve never read or heard about a spirit acting like this.”

“How many of these have you investigated personally?”

“This is the first time I’ve seen a possession in person.”

“Great.” She shook her head. “I guess we’ll just have to stumble through this together.”

He shot her a quick smile. “Guess so. The first step is to figure out what we’re dealing with. We won’t know if it’s safe to move him or not until we do. I’m going to try to...”

Michael trailed off. He thought that he had heard Benjamin mumble something that he understood, or at least partially did. He leaned in closer and listened carefully to the strange harsh words being spoken. Less than a minute later he heard it again.

“*Stella reprobj*,” he repeated quietly.

“What did you say?” Maggie asked.

He raised his voice. “Stella reprobī. It means ‘fallen star’ in Latin.”

Benjamin turned his head slightly to bring his blank gaze towards Michael. The boy continued to speak, the volume of his voice increasing as he did so. Things began to click into place in Michael’s mind, and his eyes went wide as he realized what he was seeing. He quickly grabbed the backpack and retrieved the ultraviolet light.

“You had the wrong movie,” he said, slowly backing away from the child. “Less *Poltergeist*, more *The Exorcist*.”

“Now’s not the time to be vague,” Maggie told him as Benjamin slowly got to his feet, his arms limp at his sides.

The wind started to pick up. There had been only the faintest of breezes a moment before, and the air had been thick with humidity. The gusts of air were now faster and more frequent. They carried a chill with the raw scent of winter.

“Stella reprobī,” Michael said. “Fallen star. It’s a Biblical reference.”

“Lucifer was expelled from Heaven,” she said as she picked up on what he was getting at. “I remember it from Sunday School. He was cast down along with the other angels that rebelled. He was referred to as the Fallen Star. Then this is...”

“Yes.” He turned on the ultraviolet light and pointed it at the boy. “It’s a demon.”

Michael had a hard time wrapping his head around what he was seeing. The glow of the ultraviolet light completely changed the way that Benjamin looked. It reminded him of a double exposed picture of a person. He could see the boy, but there was something else laid directly over top of his features. There were large jaws with ragged teeth snapping open and shut, and eyes that swiveled rapidly around their sockets. It pushed against some invisible barrier like it was trying to claw itself out of Benjamin's body.

"Jesus Christ," Maggie exclaimed in a strangled voice.

He ignored her. He rapidly ran through their list of options. There were only three things that he knew of that could hurt a demon. The first was iron, but he couldn't see how they could use that without harming Benjamin in the process. The second thing was silver. That had the same issues as iron. That just left..."

"Salt!" he nearly yelled. "We need salt!"

"No," she corrected him sharply. "We need to *run!*"

Benjamin had started to amble towards them. He lashed out with one arm and bashed in the top of a fallen log effortlessly. The boy opened his mouth and let out an inhuman shriek.

"Go!" she shouted.

They turned and bolted. Moving as quickly as he could over the uneven forest floor, Michael plunged forward into the darkness. The flashlight that Maggie was carrying was swinging wildly, its beam flying off in

all directions as she moved. He could hear Benjamin crashing through the woods after them.

His shoulder struck an unseen branch, and he swore as he dropped the ultraviolet light. There was no time to stop to retrieve it, though, and he continued on as he gritted his teeth in pain. Even if the demon didn't catch up to them, they were liable to break their necks during their escape attempt.

Maggie was in better shape than he was, and she began to pull ahead by a large margin as they continued on. His lungs screamed at him to stop as his limbs grew heavier, but he forced himself to continue. The sounds of pursuit from behind him were growing louder, though, and he knew that he wouldn't make it out of the woods before the demon caught up with him. It was unnaturally fast for being in such a small body.

His only choice was to hide and hope that Maggie made it out alive. He pulled the penlight out of his pocket and quickly turned on the light just long enough to see the area directly in front of him. Locating two fallen trees to his right, he turned off the light and hurried behind them. There was a gap between one of them and the ground, and he forced his body into the small space.

He was breathing heavily. In an attempt to hide the noise, he covered his mouth and nose with his forearm. The crashing sounds of his pursuer approached. The noise grew quieter as the demon slowed down. He felt his heart sink. It must have known that he had stopped.

The branches and leaves under the boy's feet crunched as the demon moved in front of the fallen trees. Michael was uncomfortably reminded of the sound of breaking bones. The boy grunted as the entity moved its legs. It came closer and began to walk around the trees and towards his hiding spot. He closed his eyes and tried his best to remain still and silent.

An owl hooted from somewhere in the distance. The demon stopped its advance, and for what seemed like an eternity the only thing Michael heard was his heart beating in his ears. A minute passed, and then two. The owl hooted a second time. The crashing began again, but this time it was headed away from him and towards the direction of the animal. He listened as the sound faded away completely.

For a long while Michael laid in the mud, his entire body shaking.

Michael emerged from the woods feeling completely exhausted. After managing to get himself back out from under the fallen trees, he had slowly made his way through the forest in the direction that he thought led back towards the houses. Luckily he had been right. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he left the last of the trees behind him.

He held up a hand and squinted as a light was beamed towards his face. A tired and disheveled Maggie approached him as she put her gun into its holster. The expression on her face was one of pure relief.

“Oh thank God,” she said. “I thought you were done for when we got split up.”

“Not quite,” he replied, happy to see that she had escaped as well. “It wasn’t for lack of trying, though. Mind putting down the flashlight?”

“Fuck, sorry.” She turned it off. “How did you get away?”

“I almost didn’t. The demon got distracted and went off to hunt something else. It’s like it operates entirely on instinct.”

“Good.”

He blinked. “You lost me on that one.”

“Going off of instinct means that it’s more like an animal than a person. It’ll be easier to set up a trap.”

Michael shook his head. "I'm all for stopping this thing, but do you think that it's a good idea to go after it in the dark? It seems like it would be smarter to wait until morning and regroup. Go back in there prepared now that we know what we're looking for."

Maggie pushed an errant lock of hair out of her face. "I'd love nothing more than to do that, but we can't. That's a kid out there. No matter what's inside of him, he's still a kid. Can you guarantee me that Benjamin Henderson won't get hurt or worse if we leave him out there until daylight?"

"No," he admitted.

"Then it has to be tonight. What distracted it when it stopped coming after you?"

"An owl making noise. At least fifty yards away from where I was."

She considered things for a moment. "We might be able to use sound to draw it out of the woods to give us more room to work with. What do you need to get the demon out of the kid?"

Michael shook his head. "Maggie, I don't know for sure that I *can* get it out."

"Okay, I get that, but give me your best guess here. What do you need?"

He rubbed his sore shoulder. "I'll need salt, as much of it as you can get your hands on quickly. He'll also need to be restrained for as long as possible. We'll need something to tie him down."

"I'll see what I can do. Back in a few minutes."

He watched her hurry back to the Henderson's house and around the side to the front door. Turning back to the matter at hand, he searched around on the ground until he found a long heavy stick. He used it to carve a large circle in the turf. Once he had finished, he started to draw a series of complex patterns in the dirt inside of the circle. He wasn't adept at magic by any stretch of the imagination, and he wasn't sure that fully remembered the exact design, but he thought that the end result was pretty close to the protection seal his grandfather had taught him back when he was a child.

Even if he did have it right, he didn't know if it worked against demons or not. It couldn't hurt, though, so it was worth the attempt.

He finished and tossed the branch off to one side. All of this was assuming that they could lure in the thing possessing Benjamin. Maggie seemed confident that they could do it. For his part, he remained skeptical. They didn't even know if it was still in the general area. At the speed it had been chasing them it could be far away by now. It was entirely possible that the boy was gone for good.

Michael wiped at the sweat dripping from his brow and looked up at the edge of the forest. The moon picked that moment to break through the clouds, and in the faint light it provided he could clearly see Benjamin standing just outside of the treeline, his eyes still blank but the rest of his face contorted in hatred.

So much for the 'gone for good' theory.

He slowly backed away until the entire seal he had drawn was between him and the boy. Benjamin simply stood near the trees and watched him. He risked a glance over his shoulder. Maggie hadn't come out of the house yet.

With a loud grunt, the boy began to advance.

"Ah shit," Michael muttered under his breath.

Benjamin reached the edge of the seal and stopped. He looked down at the markings with a tilt of his head. Michael had hoped that he would just walk blindly into it, but the demon must have been smarter than they had given it credit for. Either that, or it instinctively knew that the pattern was dangerous.

The boy started to circle around it, and Michael moved in the same direction to keep it between them. They were locked in a strange sort of dance together. They rotated all the way around the circle so that Michael ended up where Benjamin had started and vice versa.

Benjamin stopped and snarled in frustration. Although he couldn't see the demon itself without the ultraviolet light, Michael knew that it must be incensed that it couldn't reach him. He felt his cheek twitch. It had been a good thing that he had paid attention when his grandfather had taught the circle to him.

He watched as the boy got down on his hands and knees and started tearing grass out of the ground angrily. Michael watched in fascination. He had heard that gorillas did the same thing as a warning. It had something to do with claiming territory.

Benjamin raised his eyes and looked directly at Michael. The boy stood back up and clenched his hands into fists, bits of grass still hanging from them. Pulling his lips back in a snarl, he stepped over the edge of the circle.

The lines that had been drawn in the dirt began to hum. That was the best way that Michael could describe the sound. It was like electricity running through a generator. The seal was definitely reacting to the presence of the demon.

Nothing else happened. The low humming continued, but Benjamin continued to walk right through the seal. Michael took a couple of steps back. The seal was reacting to the demon, but the human body encasing it was shielding it from the effects.

“Ah shit,” he repeated.

Maggie practically broke the Hendersons' front door down as she rushed inside the house. The manufactured home wasn't large, and it only took a few long strides to reach the kitchen. She quickly began opening cabinets.

"Sheriff Grant?" Paige Henderson called from the doorway. "What are you doing? Did you find Benny?"

"I need salt," Maggie replied as she continued her frenzied rummaging.

"Honey?" Dennis Henderson asked as he appeared at his wife's side. "What's going on?"

"It's the sheriff," Mrs. Henderson answered. "She says that she needs salt."

"Salt? Why does she need salt?"

"I don't know. I can ask her. Sheriff, why do you need salt?"

"I don't have time to explain," Maggie said as she started to get aggravated. "Where do you keep it?"

"There's a salt shaker on the dining room table," Mr. Henderson offered.

"I need more than that. What did you use to fill the shaker?"

"A bag of salt."

Maggie ground her teeth. “And where is that bag of salt now?”

“Oh, I threw it out,” Mrs. Henderson informed her. “There wasn’t anything left after I filled the shaker. Dennis picked up a new bag while he was at the store.”

She felt her face growing warm. “Where did he put the new bag?”

“On the counter.” Mrs. Henderson shook her head. “He’s always leaving things on the counter and forgetting them. I had to put it away.”

“That’s right, she did,” Mr. Henderson agreed.

“For the fucking love of all that’s holy, where the fuck is the fucking salt?!” Maggie roared.

Their eyes wide and mouths hanging open, both the Hendersons pointed at a cabinet above the sink. Maggie threw open the door and found two sealed bags of salt inside. She grabbed them both and spun on her heel to face the homeowners once again.

“Do you have any rope?” she asked. Before they could reply, however, she gave them a scathing look. “If you do, just tell me where the hell to find it at this very second.”

“No rope,” Mr. Henderson answered, still in shock.

“No rope. How about...” She thought for a few seconds. “What about an extension cord? A long one, at least six feet.”

“We have one in the hallway closet,” Mrs. Henderson said.

“Thank you. Turn off all the lights in the house, then get your daughter and lock yourselves in one of the bedrooms. I’m sorry, there’s no time to explain. Just do it.”

Maggie hurried to the closet and dug around inside until she found the extension cord. It was round and orange, and it had been neatly wound up and secured with twist ties. She looped it over one shoulder and went back outside.

She heard a loud growl as she came around the side of the house. Near the treeline, Michael was holding out his hands in front of him as Benjamin Henderson approached him. She started running in his direction, the bags of salt gripped tightly in her arms.

Michael must have seen her coming. He started waving his arms and yelling at Benjamin, making sure that the boy’s attention remained fixed on him and away from the house. She crossed the rest of the distance and, not sure what else to do, swung one of the bags of salt as hard as she could at the possessed child.

The heavy bag caught him in the side and lifted him completely off of his feet. He hit the ground hard, but he recovered quickly and started getting back up. She dropped the bags and grabbed him around the waist in an attempt to wrestle him back down. The kid’s strength was incredible, and he quickly started to break free of her grip.

Benjamin shrieked as Michael threw a handful of salt into his face. It was a pained scream, and she

wincing as it made her ears start to ring. The distraction allowed her to force him to the ground.

“I can’t hold him long,” she said, struggling to maintain control. “You’ll need to get him tied up.”

Michael undid the twist ties around the extension cord and unwrapped it from her arm. He looped it around Benjamin’s feet and knotted it. She shifted her hold on the boy slightly so that he could get the hands as well. When he was finished, she cautiously released her grip and got up. Benjamin was thrashing around and yelling up at them in the same horrible language he had been spouting back in the woods, but his bonds held.

“Damn it,” she said with a shake of her head.

“The salt affected it,” Michael told her. “We have a real chance at getting this thing out of him.”

“It’s not that. I’m mad because I just had to beat up a small child.”

“Oh.” He paused. “I don’t know how to compliment you for this without it sounding terrible, but you did a great job at beating up the small child.”

She snorted despite herself. “You should see me fight nuns.”

He glanced over at the house. “What do you think, should we tell the parents that we found their kid first, or have a go at the demon before we do?”

“Try to get it out first,” she said immediately. “Trust me when I say that talking to those people is a whole lot worse than wrestling a demon.”

“There’s a story there, I take it.”

“There is, but I can tell you about it later at the Split Log after I’ve got a few dozen drinks in me. What’s the plan?”

Michael knelt down beside the boy. Benjamin strained his neck to snap his teeth towards him. He stood back up and ran a hand through his hair.

“We’re going to have to force it out,” he said, clearly thinking through things as he spoke. “It could feel the salt on the skin, and it didn’t like that feeling, but it wasn’t enough to make it come out.”

“If it doesn’t want to come out,” Maggie said, “we’ll have to go in after it.”

He nodded. “Right. The easiest way to get salt into him is to mix it with water and make him drink it.”

“Depending on how much we need to use, that could be really dangerous. Not just to the demon, but to Benjamin himself.”

“Yeah, I know. When we get the demon out, we’ll need to make sure that he drinks as much fresh water as possible. He’ll need to flush out his kidneys.”

Maggie returned to her car and retrieved three bottles of water from the rear seat. She always kept water on hand in case she got thirsty while on duty or, as was sometimes the case, needed to wash out a wound. It had never occurred to her that she might need it for something quite like this. Up until this string of disappearances, her time as sheriff had been quiet. Maybe even a bit boring. She had liked it that way.

She had heard a lot of stories about the odd happenings in Lamplight Woods over the years. Even her own father claimed to have seen something that looked a lot like Bigfoot while he was out hunting. She had never experienced anything herself, though, and she had chalked up all the stories to superstitions and wild imaginations. Mayor Dilfer had brought her into her office on the first day on the job and told her about the town's history and strange events, saying that it was something that she needed to know to perform her duties, but she still hadn't been a believer.

Benjamin was still struggling against his bindings when she returned to the backyard. It was hard to be a nonbeliever now. No matter how much she wanted to convince herself that what she had seen wasn't real, that wasn't possible anymore.

Michael took one of the water bottles from her, opened it, and poured out half of its contents onto the ground. He scooped handfuls of salt into the bottle, pausing to shake it as needed. The solution was no longer recognizable as water when he was finished. He handed her the bottle.

"I'm going to force him to open his mouth," he told her. "When he does, pour this in."

She hesitated. "Okay. I really don't like this."

He didn't meet her eyes. "Yeah, I know the feeling. There's a demon in there, but..."

"But it's still a kid."

"Yeah. Let's get this over with."

With a lot of help from Maggie, Michael managed to get the boy up into a sitting position. Benjamin thrashed around the entire time, making something that should have been easy extremely difficult instead. He hoped that the extension cord would hold long enough for them to do what they needed to.

“Ready?” he asked.

“No,” Maggie admitted matter-of-factly. “Let’s do it anyway.”

Michael grabbed the boy’s face under the chin with one hand and pinched his nose closed with the other. Benjamin seemed to comprehend what was happening and clamped his mouth shut.

“Come on,” Michael muttered as he struggled to keep his grip. “I saw you breathing. I know you still need air.”

The muscles in Benjamin’s neck began to strain and bulge.

“That’s it. You may be a demon, but the body you’re in is still human. You get all the good and bad that comes with that.”

The boy’s mouth finally opened as he gasped for air. Maggie forced the bottle into the opening and tilted it so that the salt water started pouring in. Benjamin violently whipped his head back and forth, but Michael managed to hold on as she kept pouring.

With inhuman strength, Benjamin ripped apart the cord tying his hands together. He knocked away the bottle before they could react and struck Michael hard in the chest. He was spun around and barely managed to get his hands down before his face hit the ground.

He turned back towards the boy just in time to see the child begin to retch. Benjamin's entire body tensed, and his mouth opened wide as he vomited. Salt water mixed with a thick black substance splattered onto the grass and dirt. His eyes grew so wide that they looked to be on the verge of popping out of his skull. With one final heave, he ejected a small solid object from inside of him.

The object was roughly the size and shape of a golf ball. As Michael watched, it unrolled itself and slowly moved around on the ground. It had dozens of small legs like a centipede, as well as a dark carapace that was reminiscent of an insect's. The head was rounded and, to his horror, had an almost human face.

Michael grabbed the second bag of salt and tore it open. Deciding that there was no point in being subtle about it, he dumped the entirety of the contents over the creature. It let out a pathetic cry as the crystals covered its body. After a few seconds, there was silence.

"Is it over?" Maggie asked as she sat up in the grass, having been thrown to one side when Benjamin broke free.

"I don't know," Michael answered. "I think so."

“I’m going to need something more concrete than that.”

He nodded and used the empty bag to brush away some of the salt pile. The disgusting creature had shriveled up and broken into pieces. Being careful not to touch the remains themselves, he used a twig to scoop both the dead demon and the majority of the salt into the bag. He rolled it closed and stood up.

“It’s over,” he confirmed.

Benjamin was stirring. Maggie placed her hand on her gun but didn’t draw it from its holster. The boy rolled over and sat up as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Thirsty,” he said, sounding like he was in a daze.

Maggie quickly opened another bottle of water and handed it to him. He took it without a word and drank the entire bottle, barely pausing to breathe in between gulps. She offered him the last bottle when he had finished, and he gratefully accepted it before drinking it just as quickly as he had the first.

“We’re going to need to question him,” Michael pointed out.

“I know,” Maggie said, keeping her voice light and pleasant for the boy’s sake. “He’s been through a lot, though. It will have to wait. Come on, Benjamin, let’s get you back to your parents.”

He watched as she carefully led the child around the side of the house. The adrenaline was draining away, and he felt like he had just run a marathon. With his limbs acting like they were made of lead, he

walked around the seal and used his foot to kick dirt back into the grooves that he had carved. It was best not to leave something for the homeowners to ask questions about. He glanced back at Benjamin's bedroom window. More questions than they likely already had, anyway.

He finished what he was doing and looked down at the rolled-up salt bag. The other missing children still needed to be found, but at least he knew what they were looking for now. He would have to search the records back at Forgotten Tales to see if either his father or grandfather had known of a way to track demons.

He started walking back towards the car. Benjamin had been possessed for a few hours at most. The other kids had been gone for weeks, even months. There was no telling what kind of shape they were in, assuming that there was anything left of them at all.

He rubbed his shoulder. There was also no way to know just how strong the demons inside of them had grown since the initial possession. He had no desire to face them until he had more information and a better way to defend himself than a couple of bags of salt.

He opened the car's trunk and put the bag inside. He managed to wedge it in a corner so that it wouldn't come open while he was driving. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to do with the remains, but he was certain that it was better for him to take them than to leave them in the yard.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Maggie said as she came out of the house. “You know all the stuff in the kid’s bedroom? The blood, the growths, all of that?”

“What’s wrong?” he asked quickly.

“No, that’s just it. Nothing’s wrong. It’s *gone*. No more blood, no more body tissue. It’s all disappeared like it was never there.”

He relaxed and leaned up against the side of the car. “It must have been connected to the demon itself. It can’t be a coincidence that it vanished when that thing died.”

“Yeah.” She walked over to him and leaned next to him. “You know, I can’t wait for dinner tonight.”

“Why’s that?”

“Every night Jenni and I sit down to dinner and have a nice long talk while we eat. It’s a little routine that we have. I’ll ask her how her day went, and then she’ll ask me how my day was.”

He tilted his head slightly. “I’m not sure that I see where you’re going with this.”

She smiled crookedly. “I killed a demon today. There’s no way that she did something more interesting than *that*. It’s an automatic win.”

They looked at each other and laughed. Just as they were about to stop, they exchanged another glance and it started back up again. Soon they were both crying from how hard they were laughing.

“Holy crap,” Maggie exclaimed as they finally got themselves under control. “I needed that.”

“Same,” Michael agreed, wiping his eyes. “I can’t tell if I want to go home and sleep or just pass out right here.”

“You should go home. “I think you’ve hit the ground here enough for one night.”

He grinned. “You make a good point.”

The first hint of daylight was beginning to appear on the horizon when Sarah heard her father return. She had been so involved with her search of her grandfather's room that she hadn't heard him leave, but she had found the note he had left waiting for her when she had gone downstairs.

She listened as his footsteps came up the stairs before pausing just outside her bedroom door. The door began to open, and she quickly laid down and closed her eyes. Seemingly satisfied that she was still where he had left her, her father shut the door and went back downstairs.

She opened her eyes and sat back up, her hand fishing the flashlight out from under her pillow. She pushed her comforter down to reveal the small leather book she had found during her search. The cover was soft, and it was held shut by a thin strip of leather that was tied in a knot. She undid the tie and opened it.

It was a journal. She had never seen his handwriting to know for certain, but based on the dates inside she was confident that it had been written by her grandfather. It was difficult to read the rough scribbles that constituted his handwriting.

As she grew used to it, however, she was completely fascinated by what she was reading. She had gotten about halfway through it before her father had come back home, and she had no intention of going back to sleep until she had finished it.

A lot of it didn't make sense. There were terms that she wasn't familiar with, and there was more than one section that appeared to have been written while her grandfather was drunk out of his mind. Much of it simply wasn't legible. Other parts were out-of-context notes or crude drawings. From what she could comprehend, however, it seemed as if he had been desperately searching for something.

There was one phrase that kept coming up. Her grandfather had written the words 'flesh to form' throughout the journal. Sometimes the phrase was used as part of a sentence, but in other places it was randomly written in page margins or other odd positions. It was used so often that it seemed like an obsession. She was certain the words tied in with whatever he was looking for, but she had no idea how.

The writing stopped about two thirds of the way through the journal. She flipped through the remaining pages, but they were all blank. She turned back to the final entry. It was two sentences long.

I have him. I will make things right.

She read back through the pages leading up to it, but it didn't look like they made any references to what her grandfather had meant. Who did he have? What did he have to make right?

Sarah closed the journal and used the leather strip to tie it shut. She didn't know why, but it felt like it was important for her to find out what her grandfather had been up to. Her father had said that he felt responsible for the man's funeral even though they

weren't close. She wondered if it was a similar sense of responsibility that she was feeling.

The best place to start was with whatever 'flesh to form' was. If she could figure out its meaning, it might explain the rest of the journal's entries. The trick was working out just how to do that.

She unplugged her phone from the charger and searched for the term on its web browser. A large number of hits came back, but judging by the very adult and very naked content suggested this wasn't going to work. She put the phone back down on the nightstand and slipped the journal under her mattress. Turning off the flashlight, she laid back down and went to sleep.

It was nearly ten when she woke up later that morning. Mira was awake but still lounging at the end of the bed, its belly turned up towards the ceiling as it enjoyed the sunlight coming through the window. She smiled and lightly scratched its fur for a few minutes before getting out of bed. Mira gave her a look that made it clear that it wasn't happy she had stopped scratching, but it dutifully followed her out of the bedroom anyway.

She found her father still asleep on the couch when she went to check on him. Being careful not to wake him, she went into the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal and returned to her room with it. Mira regarded her curiously as she ate. According to her father the animal didn't actually eat, instead drawing what it needed from the planet's electrical field. At first she had thought that he had been joking, but he had assured her that he was being serious. Mira didn't seem to understand why other beings had to eat,

either, as it always gave her a puzzled look whenever she put foot in her mouth.

She finished her breakfast and took a quick shower. After dressing, she grabbed her backpack and put her grandfather's journal inside. She didn't like hiding things from her father, but until she was able to figure out what the book's purpose was there wasn't much point in getting in trouble for snooping around in the bedroom. Once she had worked things through she would hand it over and come clean.

She had seen a sign for the local historical society when they had first come into Lamplight Woods and driven through town. It was a long shot, but she might be able to find some answers there. She wasn't sure how she would be able to ask the questions that she needed answered without coming off as completely insane, but she would just have to cross that bridge when she came to it.

Her father was awake when she went back downstairs. He was groggy and barely aware of his surroundings, but he was still *technically* awake. He looked at her curiously as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Where are you off to?" he asked with a yawn.

"I'm just going into town," Sarah answered, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"What for?"

"I'm going a bit stir crazy. I figured that I'd take a look around, maybe check out the library."

He smiled slightly. "If the library is anything like it was when we used to live here, it's basically three rows of books. Half of those are old copies of *Reader's Digest*."

"Maybe it's changed since then, now that the town is growing and there's more money. It's worth a look. See you later, Dad."

"Wait."

Her father was looking at her with a thoughtful expression on his face. She was sure that he had noticed her eagerness to leave and figured out that she was up to something. There might have been some sound she had made or some look that she had given that tipped him off. He was a trained criminal investigator. There were countless things he might have noticed that-

"There's a bike in the garage," he said. "You'll have to put some air in the tires, but the tires themselves looked good. There's a pump in there as well. It's better than walking in this heat."

"Oh," she replied, hoping that her surprise and relief didn't show. "Thanks."

"No problem. The key to the garage is on the hook next to the back door."

She retrieved the key and went outside. Mira followed her across the grass and gravel before sitting down and watching expectantly while she fumbled with the garage door lock. The key eventually turned as the lock released, and she raised the door.

There wasn't much inside. Besides the bike and tire pump, there was an old lawn mower that was more rust than metal, various landscaping tools, and, strangely, an ancient garden gnome. She was happy to see that the bike was still in good condition. She put air into the tires and walked it outside.

Mira was looking up at her with its head tilted to one side.

"I won't be gone long," Sarah told it. "I just need to check on something. Wait here, okay?"

The animal disappeared and reappeared in the kitchen window. She waved goodbye to it and started towards town.

Michael watched Sarah through the front window until she had gone out of sight. He let the curtain fall back down with a sigh. He hadn't believed her when she had said that she was just going into town to relieve boredom. She was a terrible liar, which given her level of intelligence was a very good thing for him as a parent.

While he didn't believe her, he still trusted her. She was a good kid, and outside of a few minor things here and there she had never given him any reason to doubt her. Even if she didn't want to tell him the real reason she was going out, he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't do anything stupid.

He glanced back at the window. On the other hand, she was still a teenager. Teenagers specialized in doing stupid things. He had partaken in more than his fair share of stupidity when he had been one. Still, she was smarter than he had been, and he didn't want to smother her.

"Being a parent sucks, Evie," he said to the empty store. "I just want to go on record as saying that I wanted a turtle instead."

There was no response, of course. He hadn't expected one. He had been speaking to Evelyn when he was alone since her death. Not all the time, just at the times he was missing her the most.

He sighed and went into the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice. Most of his body was sore, and his

brain felt like it was packed in cotton. There had been a time when he could have easily brushed off an all-night excursion, but those days had long passed. It was just another sign that he was rapidly approaching forty.

“Remember when we used to go out to Ambrose Lake?” he asked, taking a sip of his juice. “We’d get there right at dusk and just talk until the sun came up. Well, okay, there was a lot of making out involved, too. Can’t forget the making out.”

He went downstairs to the combination basement and living room. He sat down on the couch and set his glass on the table. His shoulder was still aching, and he rubbed at it absently.

“I’ve never seen anything like that demon last night, Evie,” he admitted. “Total demonic possession. Grandpa Charles told me that he had seen a few spirit possessions, but this was a whole new level of fucked up.”

He scratched his chin. “I’m kind of on the edges of something here, and I have to talk it through. I hope I don’t bore you.”

Michael stood back up and started pacing around the room slowly.

“Demons don’t pop up on their own,” he began as he started to piece together his thoughts. “They have to be brought into our world, either through an invitation or through a summoning. That means that there’s someone bringing them here. There’s a purpose behind them.”

He nodded his head as he continued to pace. “I think that’s what is causing the blood and tissue growth in the bedrooms. It’s some sort of... It’s some kind of womb. The muscle and tissue grow inside the walls to incubate the summoned demon. It’s like the child is slowly possessed while the entity grows, and when it fully takes over, it violently tears itself away from the womb. That’s where all the blood comes from.”

He stopped moving. “Wait. That explains why no one saw any of the growth during the early stages. It was connected to the demon. We could only see the demon that possessed Benjamin Harrison under ultraviolet light. It and everything connected to it must be invisible to the naked eye until it starts to physically manifest after the possession takes hold. When the demon disconnects itself from the womb, it’s no longer part of it and it becomes visible. Like pulling a tablecloth off to reveal the table underneath.”

Shaking his head, he went back over to the couch and sat down. He rubbed at his temples as he felt the beginnings of a headache. He didn’t get them often, but when he did they tended to be harsh.

“That’s all speculation,” he said. “I’ve got no proof, but that’s where my mind is at right now. I could be wrong. Let’s just follow the trail for now and see where it leads. So the demon starts out as a sort of spirit, a new being in our world rather than the fully realized being it is in its own world. That spirit is connected to this womb that not only quite literally births it into our plane of existence, but also helps it to grow and mature. Once it’s strong enough, the demonic spirit possesses the child and starts growing its physical form while controlling the child’s body. All

of this without the parent or even the child themselves knowing what is happening.”

Was that even possible, though? He wasn't sure. It fit with the evidence that he had seen so far, but a lot of it was conjecture and he doubted that he had all the information.

“There's another big question,” Michael noted. “If someone is bringing demons into Lamplight Woods, why do it like this? It seems overly complicated. From what I know about demonic summonings, they can be done without the need for a host. Light some candles, draw a few pictures on the ground, and say the magic words. That's a gross simplification, but you get what I mean. Why... *infect* these kids?”

It felt like he was missing key pieces of the puzzle. Until he found those, there was no way of knowing if he was actually onto something, or if all of this was completely incorrect.

“It doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong,” he said slowly. “Either way, it doesn't help track down the kids that are still missing.”

He paused as an unpleasant thought came to mind. “That's assuming that they're even still children. There's been a lot more time for the demons to mature in the others than there was for Benjamin Henderson.”

He closed his eyes. He couldn't afford to think like that. For now, he had to assume that the missing children could still be saved. If they couldn't, well, he would just have to deal with that if and when it came up.

What he needed was some way to find them. He didn't know of a way to do that, but maybe one of his predecessors had. He went back upstairs and into the hidden study behind the bookcase. The study was home to many relics and dangerous objects, but it was also where the Dyers had kept a collection of books, notes, and other documents from around the world that provided information about the supernatural. Somewhere in those records might be the key to locating a demon.

The collection was separated alphabetically by topic, and it only took him a few minutes to locate the shelf dedicated to demons. He was disappointed to find that there wasn't much there, just a few books and files. It made sense, though. The Dyers hadn't been interested in every single text that had ever been written about every single subject. They had been only interested in true accounts and practical knowledge, with a focus on things actually happening in Lamplight Woods. The family business was a small operation, after all, and there were only so many hours in the day. With so much fiction and unsubstantiated lore around demons it was no wonder there wasn't much factual information.

Michael gathered the documents up and took them over to the desk. He worked slowly and methodically, making sure that he went over each item carefully before setting it off to the side and moving onto the next. When he had finished, he repeated the process to make sure that he didn't miss anything. He thought about going through the documents a third time, but he knew that the result would be the same. There wasn't anything in them about tracking a demon.

“Well, Evie, if I ever wanted to summon a demon I’d be all set,” Michael said, sitting down in the chair. “Trying to find one... Not so much.”

He gathered the documents back up and returned them to where he had gotten them from. There either wasn’t a way to track a demon’s whereabouts, or, more likely, the method hadn’t been discovered by his father or grandfather. He was at a dead end.

His eyes wandered over to a glass jar sitting on one of the tables. He had transferred the remains of the dead demon from the salt bag into the jar before he had gone to sleep. What he needed was the paranormal equivalent of a bloodhound that could get the scent from it.

He felt a shiver run down his spine. There was one thing that had a chance of working, but there was no way that he would resort to *that*.

“I can’t do that, Evie,” he said into the silence. “I *won’t* do that.”

Even as the words left his mouth he knew that they were false. What he really couldn’t do was fail to explore every possibility to bring the missing kids back safely. Every fiber of his being screamed at him that he was making a mistake, but he didn’t have a choice.

“Fuck,” he swore with a violent shake of his head, standing up and retrieving the jar from the table.

There was a nice breeze as Sarah guided the bike into downtown Lamplight Woods. A storm was brewing off in the distance, and it had brought cooler air with it. It was still very warm, and she missed the smell of the wind coming off of the ocean back home, but at least she wasn't sweating out of every pore in her body.

It was, however, warm enough for her to be extremely thirsty even though it was just over a mile from Forgotten Tales to town. She rode up to a convenience store and leaned the bike against the brick wall next to another one. As far as she could tell there weren't any bike racks in Lamplight Woods, and even if there had been it wasn't like she had brought a chain and lock.

She went into the store and looked around. She had never seen a place quite like it. There were the usual aisles and coolers that she expected to find in a grocery store, but there were also items like clothing, books, tools, and even car parts.

"I like to think of it as someone having stuck a Walmart in a dryer," a voice said from nearby.

She turned towards the speaker and found a boy her own age looking back at her. He was tall, a full head taller than she was, and his body was thin. He was wearing a plain red shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. A thin pair of glasses adorned his face.

"Pardon?" she asked.

“You know, like it’s a shrunk-down megastore,” he elaborated. “A wide variety of items shoved into an itty bitty space.”

“Oh, yeah. I get what you’re saying.”

He smiled. “Don’t mind me. I’m told that I’m very unfunny for someone that tries so hard to be. My name is Josh Tayler.”

She smiled back, not sure what to make of him. “Sarah Dyer.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A Dyer, are you? I shouldn’t be talking with you, then.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And why is that?”

“Because you’ll turn me into a toad or make my hair fall out with a magic spell, of course.”

Josh’s smile widened, and Sarah couldn’t help but laugh.

“Is that really what people around here think of my family?” she asked.

“Some people, yeah,” Josh answered with a shrug. “Other people think that everyone in your family is completely crazy. Oh, and there are the folks that think you’re just a bunch of frauds.”

“And what is it that you think about the Dyer clan?”

She was expecting a joke, but he surprised her by actually considering the question for a moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was still kind even though the humor was gone.

“I think,” he said, “that anyone that makes broad judgments about entire families tends to have a pretty useless opinion. My dad used to take me into *Forgotten Tales* sometimes when I was little, and Mr. Dyer was always nice to me.”

“You knew my grandfather?” Sarah asked, a bit more forcefully than she intended.

“Not well, but I met him a few times. He and my dad used to fish together a few times a year.” Josh’s expression changed as something occurred to him. “Oh, I’m sorry, you came in for a reason and here I am pestering you.”

“You’re not pestering me,” she assured him. “Actually, it’s kind of nice to talk to someone my own age and not related to me for a change. My dad is great, but I’ve been around him constantly for the past week.”

“I definitely get where you’re coming from. Hey, if you’re really looking for a change of pace, I’m going to grab some food and head down to the lake for a while. I don’t suppose that you’d want to come?”

She hesitated. She had planned to do research at the historical society. On the other hand, she wasn’t really sure what she was looking for, so the chances of her finding anything there were slim to none.

“Yeah, sure, that sounds fun,” she told him. “It looks like there’s a storm coming in, though.”

“There’s plenty of cover if it does,” Josh assured her. “Besides, a little rain never hurt anyone.”

“You know how us witches are. We melt if we come into contact with water.”

He grinned. “That’s true. I guess it all comes down to if you’re willing to take a chance, then.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You know what? I think that I just might be willing to.”

A few minutes later, Sarah was following Josh as he led her back out of town and down a trail leading into the woods. The storm had drawn closer, but there was still plenty of time before it reached Lamplight Woods. She idly wondered if the dirt trail would be a mudslide when they eventually headed back.

She looked at the back of her companion and his bike as she followed. He was very strange. Although she hadn’t known him very long, he seemed like the kind of person that would tell you exactly what was on his mind whether you wanted to hear it or not. At the same time he came across as both funny and intelligent. She wondered how often that combination got him into trouble.

About a mile down the trail they came to two metal poles, one on each side of the path. There was a chain attached to one side, and lying on the ground attached to that chain was a metal sign. Josh stopped and moved it out of the way so that they didn’t have to ride over it.

“This land is technically owned by the Ambrose Logging Company,” he explained, seeing the questioning look on her face.

He held up the sign so that she could see it. It was adorned with the name of the company, as well as a logo of a pine tree inside of a green circle. The sign stated that this was private property.

“It doesn’t sound like we should be here,” Sarah said nervously.

“Oh, don’t worry, they left Lamplight Woods way before I was born. They still own the land, but no one has used it in decades. Come on, we’re almost there.”

They continued on. Sarah looked down at the sign as she passed it. She was suddenly feeling uneasy. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea.

They came out of the other side of the trees and arrived at a huge clearing with a lake. The water was clean and clear, and its surface reflected the morning sky. They set their bikes on the ground and walked down to the edge.

“Not bad, right?” Josh asked as he waved an arm towards the lake dramatically.

“Not bad at all,” Sarah agreed. “What are those?”

She indicated a pair of dark shapes on the far side of the lake.

“Those were left behind when the company pulled out. The one on the left is a trailer, and the one on the right is a crane. Some of the local kids hooked up a tire swing to it a while back so that they could use it to throw themselves into the water.”

“Oh, so other people come here, too? Not just you?”

He gave her a half smile. “Well, yeah. You didn’t think I was leading you somewhere to give you the *Friday the 13th* treatment, did you?”

She snorted. “You can never tell these days. I’m sure Jason Vorhees looked normal at some point. You know, before the whole drowning thing.”

“We are absolutely watching bad horror movies together sometime.” He pointed off to their left, where a man and woman in their twenties were walking around the lake. “You don’t have to worry about any hockey masks or Kevin Bacon getting stabbed with an arrow. This lake is Lamplight Woods’ worst-kept secret.”

There were a wide range of thoughts and emotions running through Michael as he stood in front of the shed. He let them wash over him for a few moments before mentally shoving them away. It took him less than a minute to locate the hatch. When he did, he opened it and descended down the stairs into the first chamber.

Michael recognized the design and layout. The room had been built like a slaughterhouse. The hooks were the same kind used for hanging heavy slabs of meat, and the entire floor was gently sloped towards a drain so that dripping fluids would run into it.

He looked at the sinks thoughtfully. Why would his father have needed to install four of them instead of just one? The only reason he could think of was that it hadn't just been one person using the room. That brought up a whole mountain of questions that he didn't have time to work through.

He started to move on when he noticed a metal box just to the left of the sinks. It was dark gray and mounted on the wall, and it had blended into the shadows so well that he wouldn't have seen it if he hadn't been looking directly at it. He went over to it and opened it. It was a breaker box. He flipped all the switches to the right, and bright fluorescent lights came on overhead with a dull hum. There were two small red buttons just to the right of the panel, but he decided against pressing them.

He passed through the heavy metal doors and into the room with the cages. With the lights on he was able to see more details than Sarah had, including a series of wires that ran down the wall and into the cages. He could hear the sound of running electricity even though he wasn't standing near them. The cage bars were electrified.

He went through the next door and arrived in the prison-like hallway. There were less lights here, just one small light per door. He was tempted to look into each room through the doors' sliding panels so that he could view the occupants, but he resisted the urge. He was only here for one resident.

He reached the final door and stopped. He was feeling much less sure of himself than he had been even two minutes prior. Knowing intellectually that he needed to do this was one thing, but it was quite another to actually convince himself to do it.

Michael felt something tugging at the hem of his shorts. He looked down to find Mira standing next to him, its teeth biting into the fabric as it pulled. The creature's eyes made it clear that it wanted them both to leave.

"I know, Mira," he said. "Believe me, I know. I have to, though. Meet me back at the house, okay?"

Mira released its grip on the shorts and took a step back. It regarded him intently for a long moment before vanishing. He smiled slightly. It had always been protective of him.

The smile faded as he turned back towards the door. There was no point in delaying any further. He

reached out and put his hand on the panel to slide it open.

Before he could do so, he felt a soft thump against the door from the other side. He instinctively pulled his hand back. He listened as hard as he could, but the only thing that he could hear was the hum from the light above him.

“Hello, Mikey,” a high-pitched raspy and all-too-familiar voice said from the other side of the door. “It’s nice to see you again.”

There had been a time that voice would have terrified him. Now, though, he found that it instead filled him with anger. His hand clenched tighter against the glass jar he was carrying. He forced himself to calm down.

“Billy,” Michael replied, hearing the strain in his own voice as he spat out the name.

“Are you here to play with me?” Billy Baxter asked, somehow managing to make the childish question sound like a threat.

“We’re done with playtime. We have been for a long time now.”

“Maaaaybe.” There was a hissing noise that Michael recognized as the monster’s laugh. “Evie seemed to enjoy playing with me. She was fun to play with, too. Right up until there was that loud *pop* and she stopped playing.”

Michael closed his eyes as the rage began to boil over. He wanted nothing more than to throw the door open and wrap his hands around Baxter’s throat. It

was only with every bit of effort that he could muster that he managed to remain in control of himself.

“If you’re not here to play, Mikey, why did you come visit me?” Baxter asked.

“I need you to do something for me,” Michael forced himself to say.

“Oh, a favor! Why didn’t you say so, Mikey? I love doing favors. What do you need?”

“I need to know if you can locate demons.”

“How fun. A game of Hide and Seek without the hiding part. But Mikey, what makes you think that little ol’ me could find big nasty demons? I’ve been locked up in this metal room for oh so long.”

“Cut the crap,” Michael snapped. “You and I both know that you have your ways, and being confined like this is just an inconvenience for you.”

“Shh, that’s supposed to be a secret.” Baxter laughed again. “If I could help you, I would. I wouldn’t even charge a fee. I would be happy to do this teensy weensy little favor free of charge.”

“There’s always a price with you.”

“True, true. In this case, though, my playtime with Evie all those years ago would have been payment enough.” There was a pause. “Here’s the thing, Mikey. I’m afraid that I can’t do what you’re asking me to.”

Michael bristled. “Can’t, or won’t?”

“Can’t. It was a good thought, especially bringing that dead parasite along with you in case I needed it to be your little psychic bloodhound. The problem is that those other beasties that are roaming around out there aren’t exactly demons. They walk like ducks, and they talk like ducks, but they ain’t ducks. Your deceased friend in the jar didn’t have time to work its magic like the others have.”

“What does that mean?”

“Give it a minute and I’m sure it will come to you. You’ve always been so *clever*.”

“Fuck you.” He thought things through for a moment before coming to a realization. “It’s the kids, isn’t it? That’s why the demons were brought into the world the way that they were. It’s creating a sort of human demon hybrid.”

“There you go!” the creature congratulated him. “I knew you could get there on your own. A new kind of being, one that can be shaped and molded however the one calling the shots sees fit. Like clay to a sculptor, or fire to a pyromaniac. So sorry, kiddo, you’re on your own finding them.”

Michael backed away from the iron door. He had his answer, and there was no reason to stay any longer. He started back down the hallway towards the exit.

“What, no thank you?” Baxter called from inside of his cell. “No kiss goodbye?”

Michael paused with his hand on the round metal door leading into the cage room. He kept his back to

the hallway, but he turned his head to make sure that Baxter heard him.

“Someday I’m going to figure out a way to kill you,” he said firmly. “When I do, I’m going to *end* you.”

There was one final laugh. “I’m so looking forward to seeing you try, Mikey.”

Maggie had never really felt comfortable in an office setting. When she was growing up she had basically been shoved out the door at the beginning of each day and was allowed back inside well after it was dark, so she was much more accustomed to being outdoors. In her mind, working in an office was just this side of working in a coffin.

She avoided her own office as much as possible. There were entire weeks that would go by where she didn't see the inside of it. That was how she liked it, and more than once she had mused to herself that the office probably preferred that arrangement, too.

She shifted in the small chair she was seated in. Being in someone else's office was even worse. It felt like she had been called in to see the principal.

She watched the mayor slowly read through the report that she had turned in. The principal analogy wasn't really that far off.

"So Benjamin Henderson is all right?" Dilfer asked without looking up.

"Yes, ma'am," Maggie replied with a nod. "His parents had him checked out this morning, and Doc Taylor said that he's fine. Physically, anyway. I can only imagine the dreams the kid is going to have."

"Hmm." Dilfer set the report down and finally turned her full attention to the sheriff. "What story did you tell the parents? Not the truth, I hope."

“I haven’t really told them anything. I mean, how do you explain to someone that their child was possessed by a demon?”

“You don’t. Some of the older residents in Lamplight Woods might believe you, but the Hendersons moved in when SMR came to town. They’d think you’re completely insane. I’ll come up with something and speak to them personally. It helps that the boy doesn’t remember anything about the ordeal.”

“What will you say?”

“I said that I will take care of it. It’s no longer your concern. What about Mr. Dyer?”

Maggie blinked. “What about him?”

“What are your thoughts on him, Margaret?”

Maggie bristled slightly at the use of her full name. Nobody called her that, and that was by design. She detested it.

“I don’t know him that well,” she replied.

“Humor me with your first impressions, then,” Dilfer said firmly.

“All right.” Maggie crossed her arms over her chest as she considered the question. “He seems like a decent enough guy. He wants to help these missing kids. Intelligent. Knows his job and police procedures. I guess I don’t know exactly what you’re looking for here.”

“Hmm.”

There was silence. Maggie shifted in her seat again. It felt strange to be sitting there in a short-sleeved shirt and shorts instead of her uniform. While she was always on call as Lamplight Woods' only law enforcement officer, this was technically her day off and she had planned on enjoying it.

“So you feel like you can work effectively with him,” Dilfer stated.

“What, you mean work with him on this case?” Maggie asked with a frown.

“For now, yes.”

“Yeah, sure. No problem there.”

“Good. Thank you for coming in, Margaret.”

“I have a question before I go.”

The mayor raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah. He told me that you told him that some of the kids were dead. You knew that wasn't the case, at least not that we could confirm. Why would you tell him that?”

Dilfer waved a hand. “To get him to agree to help, of course. I could tell that he was going to need an additional push in the right direction, so I gave him that push.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes. “That's not exactly taking the moral path.”

“I'm not interested in the path that gets taken. I only care about it leading to where I want it to. If there's nothing else...?”

She was being dismissed. With a nod, she stood up and left the office, making sure to close the door behind her. Her opinion of the mayor had managed to sink even lower than it was before, if that was even possible.

She felt like she had wasted an hour. Dilfer could have easily read her report without her being present. It wasn't like she had asked a lot of followup questions, and the ones that she had asked could have easily been handled over the phone.

Maggie stopped by her office to check the mail. The sheriff's department and the mayor's office occupied the same building, along with a number of other town government offices. She unlocked her door and found a pile of envelopes sitting on the floor where the mail slot had dumped them out.

She gathered up the letters and deposited them on her desk. There wasn't much room to maneuver, and she had to turn sideways to make it around to the other side of the desk and into her chair. She had used to joke that her office was nothing more than a repurposed broom closet. She had stopped making that joke when she had learned that the original plans for building had actually listed the space as a maintenance closet.

She had never been able to decide if she found that funny or depressing.

Most of the letters were either junk mail or notices for things that she was already aware of. During her time as sheriff, she had noticed that the state and federal governments loved to send out both emails as well as physical copies of the same things. She

raised an eyebrow at one particular notice stating that she needed to renew a required certification before the end of April. It was now June. Luckily she had already taken care of it before the certification had expired.

At the bottom of the pile was a small folded piece of notebook paper with a handwritten note scrawled inside. She recognized the handwriting as that of the office assistant that all the departments in the building shared. There wasn't enough work to justify an assistant for each office, so all non-emergency calls were routed through the same person.

Mrs. Claredon called and said that she heard weird yelling, the note read.

Maggie sighed. That didn't tell her much. Grace Claredon was constantly calling in to complain about her neighbors even though none of them lived close to her. It happened so often that it had become something of a running joke. "Weird yelling" was a new one, though.

She squeezed her way out of her office and headed down the hall towards the assistant station. More than a few times she had wondered why the building assistant had gotten a larger office than the majority of the town employees there. While she didn't like to be stuck inside, it might have been more bearable if she at least had a window.

She reached the office and went inside. She immediately regretted doing so.

The assistant, a blonde woman named Kaitlyn, was lying on her desk with her blouse unbuttoned. On top of her was a balding man at least twenty years

older than she was, his tie hanging loose and his shiny head glistening with sweat. They both turned towards her with surprised looks on their faces.

“Whoa!” Maggie exclaimed, quickly turning to face in the opposite direction. “What the fuck?!”

“Sheriff Grant!” Kaitlyn practically yelled. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. Get off of me, Carl.”

“Don’t say my name!” the man hissed at her.

“I know it’s you, Carl Bowler,” Maggie said, continuing to avert her gaze.

“Dammit!”

“Please, Sheriff Grant, please don’t tell the mayor about this,” Kaitlyn pleaded.

Maggie shook her head in disbelief at the whole situation. “Look, I got your note that Mrs. Claredon called last night. What did you mean by her hearing weird noises?”

“I don’t know.” There was a loud thump, likely from someone getting off of the desk. “She said that it was really loud, like someone screaming into a microphone. That’s all that she said. I’m so sorry, we were just-”

“Don’t finish that sentence!” Maggie snapped as she retreated from the office. “Not one more word about this if you want to keep your job!”

“I have to tell you, I’m simply amazed right now,” Sarah said, splashing her feet in the water as she reclined back on her elbows.

“I’m a pretty amazing person,” Josh replied as he crossed his arms behind his head on the sand.

“What I’m amazed at is that a person can be as wrong about something as you’re being right now.”

“What you call being wrong is what I call being the only sane person in the conversation.”

“Oh, that’s what you call it.”

“That’s what I call it.”

She shook her head and laughed. The disagreement they were having was so absurd that it was impossible to take it seriously, and yet her competitive streak was urging her on. She turned back to him with a look of challenge.

“You *really* think that Sonic the Hedgehog is a better mascot than Mario?” she asked, not even bothering to hide the disbelief in her voice.

“Not only do I think it,” Josh answered as he returned the look, “I can prove it.”

She scoffed. “This I have to hear.”

“I’m happy to explain. Let’s start with Mario.”

“You mean the world’s most famous video game character.”

He nodded. “I’m not debating that Mario is famous or influential. He’s completely iconic. He moves a lot of sales, too. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that he’s the first thing that most people think of when you bring up video games.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I feel like you’re making my argument for me.”

“Here’s the problem: he makes no sense. Mario is a short Italian plumber that fights a spike-covered dinosaur that repeatedly kidnaps the same princess over and over. Most of that falls into the ‘fine, whatever’ category. Video games aren’t usually known for their realism, especially back when Mario was created. It’s the first part that matters to this particular topic, though. He’s an *Italian plumber*. How is that representative in any way of Nintendo, a Japanese game company?”

“Pac-Man is a yellow circle that eats dots in a haunted house, and Namco uses him as its mascot. I don’t think that we can be too literal with these things.”

He nodded again. “Agreed, but a truly great mascot should make your brand’s message loud and clear. Enter Sonic the Hedgehog. When Sega decided to really push the Genesis, all of the marketing was focused on attitude. Sega took potshots at the competition, which was mainly Nintendo at that point. Sonic was designed with that attitude in mind. The pictures in the ads and even on the box art for his games showed him with a smug

look on his face and a finger in the air like he was wagging it at you. He was the perfect mascot for what Sega was going for.”

Sarah silently regarded him for a moment before saying, “You’re a giant dork. You do realize that, right?”

“Well, yes, I don’t think that was ever in doubt. Is that a problem?”

She smiled. “I didn’t say that.”

There was a rumbling sound in the distance as the storm grew closer. The wind had picked up, and the sun was hidden away behind the clouds. It wouldn’t be long before it started to rain.

She watched as the two other people at the lake headed away from the water and towards the woods. After a few moments they vanished down a different trail than the one she and Josh had used earlier. Apparently there were multiple places to access the lake from.

“Looks like we’re the only ones that aren’t afraid of a little rain,” Josh commented.

“Yeah.” Something caught her eye. “Wait, no. Over there, by the trailer.”

She thought that she had seen movement from the other side of the lake. She watched for it to happen again, but when nothing did she began to think that she had imagined it. Just as she was about to look away, she saw it again. It was a small figure moving near the side of the abandoned trailer.

“That looks like a kid,” he said, sitting all the way up.

“Do little kids come here often?” she asked.

“They do, but always with a parent or older sibling. Almost never on that side of the lake. There’s a lot of dangerous debris and junk lying around.”

“Should we do something?”

His eyes narrowed as he considered it. “We probably should. The kid might be lost.”

“It’s going to start pouring soon. Come on.”

They stood up and brushed the sand off of themselves. Sarah put her shoes back on and they started walking around the lake. Every so often she would see another flicker of motion from the figure, but it became more difficult to see as the light dimmed from the clouds gathering overhead.

“I forgot how long it takes to actually walk around this thing,” Josh said as they were roughly halfway to their destination. “Usually when I go over to the other side I come in from one of the closer paths.”

“Maybe you’re just out of shape,” Sarah joked. “So why did they shut down the logging company, anyway? Seems like there’s still plenty of trees.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think that anyone really knows why, at least not for sure. It happened overnight. One day everything was going along as normal, and the next the place was closed when the workers got there for the morning shift. Lots of rumors about it, obviously. Small towns are really good at coming up with rumors.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. The facility closed down because of someone dying, the Ambrose family ran out of money, there was some sort of scandal, that sort of thing. Like I said, no one knows for sure what happened. The owners left everything behind, too, which is weird.”

She furrowed her brow. “That *is* weird. You’d think that they’d want to sell everything off if they weren’t coming back.”

“Exactly. Also, why keep ownership of the land for all these years if you’re just going to abandon it? It doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

They finally reached the other side of the lake. Sarah looked up at the old crane as they passed it. The machine was covered in dirt and rust; it obviously hadn’t been used in a long time. Its boom was lowered so that it was sticking straight out over the water. Where the hook normally would have been was instead a chain that hung down from the arm and wrapped around a black tire.

Her foot caught on the edge of something, and she would have fallen if Josh hadn’t reached out at the last second to steady her. She smiled at him in gratitude and looked to see what she had tripped over. There was a large piece of sheet metal just barely sticking out of the sand.

“There’s a lot of this scrap along the beach,” he warned. “You’ll need to keep an eye out for it.”

Past the crane was a run-down metal trailer. It was long, close to twenty-five feet in length, and it

was rounded on the corners. It was a strange comparison, but it reminded her of a big steel Twinkie.

They walked around the trailer, but the small figure they had caught glimpses of was nowhere to be seen. Sarah knelt down to check under the structure. It had been placed on cinder blocks, leaving a small gap between the trailer and the ground. It was dark underneath, and she had to use the light from her phone to see. There was nothing there.

“I don’t see the kid anymore,” Josh said as he looked around. “They must have left while we were walking. There were a couple of minutes there where the crane was blocking our view.”

“We haven’t checked inside the trailer yet,” Sarah pointed out.

“It’s been locked ever since I started coming here. There’s a big padlock on the door.”

She picked up a silver object that the light from her phone had shined off of. She stood back up and held it out to him. He took it from her with a confused expression on his face.

“You mean there *was* a big padlock on the door,” she corrected him as he held up the lock to get a better look at it.

“Apparently so,” he agreed. “Sarah, this lock isn’t open. It’s been broken.”

They both slowly turned to face the trailer’s door.

The wind was blowing hard by the time Maggie reached Grace Claredon's house. Before she got out of the car, she dug around in the glove compartment for a hair tie. It took a few minutes, but she was eventually able to find one and get her hair put back in a ponytail. Although she usually liked having long hair, it tended to repeatedly smack her in the face when it was windy.

She got out of the car and paused. Her gun was back at her house inside of the safe in the master bedroom. During her entire time as sheriff she had never had to fire it outside of a shooting range, and she didn't like carrying it when she was out of uniform. She felt that it gave the wrong impression to be walking around in civilian clothing with a weapon holster belted around her waist.

Now, though, she was technically on the job and didn't have her firearm. She sighed and shut the car door. She was responding to a phone call from an eighty-year-old woman that had heard some shouting out back the night before. It wasn't like she needed to be armed to handle something like that. She stuck her wallet in her pocket in such a way as to display her badge and started up the stone walkway to the house.

The Claredon house was one of the largest homes in Lamplight Woods. It was three stories tall, with a sharply pitched roof and two chimneys. There was open lawn in every direction; the nearest neighbor was over half a mile away.

The house had once been the nicest in town. Now, though, the years and lack of maintenance had taken their toll. The painted wood was chipped in many places, and the stone pavers that made up the walkway were broken. A number of shingles were missing from the roof.

It was just too much house for one person. Grace Claredon had once lived there with her husband and two sons, but her husband had died from liver cancer a long time ago and the boys had been killed in a car accident soon after. Because of these tragedies, she now lived in the large house all alone.

The floorboards of the porch creaked loudly as Maggie stepped onto them. She winced as one particular plank let out a squeak so high-pitched that it hurt. She knocked on the door and waited.

There was no answer. She tried again, crossing her arms and cocking her head. When that led to the same result, she pushed the small white doorbell. She heard it chime through the front of the house, but still no one came to the door.

Maggie frowned and went over to the side of the porch. She leaned over the wood railing and looked down the driveway. Grace Claredon's massive Buick was parked at the end of it.

She left the porch and walked around the side of the house. The lawn was freshly cut, but the flowerbeds were starting to become overgrown with weeds and unruly shrubs. She reached the backyard and looked over the short fence. There was no one there.

She was starting to leave when she noticed that the screen door was open. Maggie opened the gate and stepped into the backyard, feeling her feet sink a few centimeters in the soft turf. The ground made an unpleasant squishing sound as she walked. She made a mental note to suggest watering less when she found the homeowner.

She found that the screen door wasn't just open. It had been torn free of the top hinge and was hanging off to one side. Just beyond it, the back door leading into the house was standing open. From what she could see there weren't any lights on inside.

"Yeah, no," she muttered to herself.

She left the backyard and went back to her car. Retrieving her keys from her pocket, she unlocked the trunk and opened it. On the right side was a long lockbox that had been drilled into the car itself. She unlocked it and opened the lid.

Inside was a 12 gauge shotgun with a brown stock and fore-end. One of the more distasteful parts of her job as sheriff was occasionally having to put down animals, usually deer that had been struck by vehicles. She carried the shotgun in the car for when that service was needed.

She loaded three shells into the weapon and put three more into her pocket. It was very possible that Grace Claredon simply hadn't heard her knocking, and that the old woman had gone back into the house at some point and forgotten to close the door behind her. Maybe the wind had broken the screen door. If there was something less innocent going on, though, Maggie was going to be ready.

The past couple of days had shaken her more than she liked to admit. The disappearances had been bad enough, but having to accept that things like demons were real had made her feel no longer in control. A week earlier she would have gone into the house without a second thought. Now she felt like she needed a lethal weapon to do so. She didn't like the change.

Maggie shut the trunk and walked back to the house, the shotgun carefully pointed at the ground in front of her. Even though she was a bit rattled, she was determined to proceed safely and rationally. She wasn't going to let her nerves control her and get someone killed. The weapon would stay down until it was absolutely necessary.

She nearly dropped the shotgun in surprise when her phone rang. She stopped moving and took a pair of deep breaths to get herself under control again. Berating herself for being so wound up, she pulled the phone out of her back pocket and answered it.

"Yeah, hello," she said, much harsher than she had intended.

"Well hello to you, too," a familiar voice replied.

Maggie sighed. "Oh, Jenni, it's you."

"What a warm greeting. Are you okay, babe? You sound strange."

"I'm fine," she assured her wife. "I'm just handling something. It's a work thing."

“Ah. You do know that you’re supposed to be off of work when it’s not a work day, right? That’s kind of how work schedules, well, *work*.”

Maggie smiled slightly. “Yeah, well, you know. The exciting life of a small-town sheriff and all that.”

“Hopefully nothing *too* exciting,” Jenni said with just a hint of worry in her voice.

“Don’t worry, everything’s fine.” She glanced up at the house and wished that she was as sure as she was trying to sound. “I do have to go, though.”

“Yeah, of course. Really quick, why don’t you invite that consultant guy that’s been helping you over for dinner tonight? I can make my famous baked ham.”

“Sure. I’ll call him when I’m done here.”

“Great. You said that he has a daughter, right? Invite her, too.”

“Okay. I really *do* have to go now.”

“Right, right. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Maggie hung up and slipped the phone back into her pocket. Taking a deep breath, she put both hands on the shotgun and started walking towards the backyard.

“I really don’t think that we should be going in there,” Josh said as he bounced the broken lock in his hand.

“I agree,” Sarah said as she looked at her phone. “This seems more like a job for Sheriff Grant. Damn it, I’m not getting any signal. How about you?”

He pulled out his phone and checked. “No bars. This part of Lamplight Woods is pretty bad for signal on the best days, and I’m sure the incoming storm isn’t helping.”

“What do you think, head back and call from town?”

Josh opened his mouth to answer, but before any words could come out his eyes shifted their focus away from her and over her shoulder. He closed his mouth as a confused expression fell over his face. She turned to see what he was looking at.

Just on the other side of the crane was a young girl. She was maybe six or seven, and she was wearing a dirt-stained nightgown. She was standing completely still with her arms at her sides and her eyes staring directly at them.

“Where did she come from?” Josh asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Sarah said. “Do you know her?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

The girl continued to watch them silently. Sarah hesitantly took a few steps forward. No matter how strange the circumstances were, this was still a young child that had clearly gone through something bad.

“Hey,” she said with what she hoped was a warm smile. “Are you okay, honey? Are your parents around? Do you need help?”

The girl didn’t respond.

“It’s going to start raining soon,” Josh tried. “It looks like it’s going to really come down. Is there somewhere we can take you, or someone in your family that we can tell where you are?”

This time the girl stirred. She moved her head slightly and opened her mouth. Sarah had crossed half the distance between them, and she could hear the girl’s heavy breathing.

Sarah stopped moving. Something about the breathing was wrong. The sound was off, or the cadence wasn’t right, or...

Her eyes widened. It wasn’t the *sound* of the breathing. It was the breathing itself. The girl’s chest wasn’t rising or falling.

The girl’s mouth opened wider, far wider than it should have been able to. It was like her jaw had become unhinged. Inside of her maw was a deep blackness, an endless void of dark.

Fingers began to emerge from that darkness. They were thin, almost skeletal, and so pale that Sarah could see the veins under the tight skin. Six of

them extended outward and bent to grip the sides of the girl's mouth, three on each side. Beyond them were two round objects that were barely visible against the black hole. They were eyes.

"What in the *fuck*?" Josh said from behind her in a voice barely above a whisper.

The girl took a step forward.

Sarah turned and ran. Josh was staring at the girl in disbelief. She grabbed his hand as she went past him and practically dragged him after her. They had only gone a few yards when the girl was suddenly standing in front of them. She had launched herself forward with surprising speed.

They came to a halt. The eyes watched them from inside the open mouth as the girl's head slowly moved from side to side. She bent forward slightly. There was a noise that Sarah couldn't quite identify. It was wet, like thick liquid sloshing around in a container.

This time it was Josh that reacted first. He reached down and scooped up a handful of sand, and in the same motion he flung it into the girl's face. She instinctively flinched, and both her eyes and the ones peering out from her mouth closed as the sand struck them. He pulled Sarah back the way that they had come as the girl roared an inhuman cry of frustration. Instead of running past the trailer, however, he led them over to the door and flung it open. They hurried inside and he slammed the door shut behind them, sliding the lock closed.

“That lock is shit,” Sarah whispered as she caught her breath. “If that thing broke through the padlock outside, it’s not going to have any trouble with *that*.”

“What is it?” Josh asked, obviously trying to control himself and only partially succeeding.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Right now all that matters is keeping us in *here* and it out *there*. Help me find something to block the door with.”

The inside of the trailer looked just as rough as the outside. They were standing in the small kitchen area, complete with a two burner stove and an old refrigerator that looked like it had been around since the 1960s. To the right was a small doorway separating the kitchen from a sleeping area, and to the left was a table surrounded on three sides by a built-in booth.

“The refrigerator,” Sarah said, quickly moving over to it.

It was extremely heavy, and the metal exterior whined and creaked as they struggled to move it over to the door. She gritted her teeth and strained against it. It was a slow process, and they didn’t have much time.

They finally managed to push the refrigerator up against the door. It wasn’t a moment too soon, as just as Sarah was letting go of the metal something slammed into the outside of the door. The entire trailer shook from the impact. There was a second hit, and then a third. Each time she was sure that the refrigerator was going to topple over and the way into the trailer would be clear, but their makeshift barricade managed to hold.

The impacts stopped as the odd sound of countless tiny bells became audible. It was such an odd noise that for a moment Sarah was completely baffled by what was happening. Once that moment had passed, she realized that she was hearing raindrops striking the trailer's metal roof.

There was an eerie silence that was only broken up by the rain. Sarah strained her ears to listen while Josh moved towards one of the trailer's two small windows. She watched as he took a deep breath and moved the ragged polyester curtain out of the way to peer outside. After a few seconds he waved her over.

The window was filthy and difficult to see out of, but as far as she could tell there was no sign of the little girl. Frowning, she went over to the second window for a different angle, but she still couldn't see where the girl had gone. She closed the curtain.

"Do you think she left?" she asked quietly.

"No," Josh said with a shake of his head. "I can see her. Barely."

She returned to the window he was at and looked in the direction that he pointed towards. She didn't see anything except for the crane and the lake.

"All the way back," he said. "Just inside the trees."

At the very edge of the treeline, barely covered by the overhanging foliage, was the girl. It was hard to tell from that distance, but it looked like her mouth had closed. She seemed to just be standing still and staring at the trailer.

"Why did she stop?" Josh asked.

“It has to be the rain, doesn’t it?” Sarah replied. “It can’t be a coincidence.”

“So when it stops...”

“Yeah.” She swallowed hard. “She comes back.”

Maggie shivered as the rain began to fall. Ignoring it, she closed the backyard gate behind her and walked over to the broken screen door. She knocked loudly on the door frame and waited for a response. When she didn't receive one, she pushed the screen out of the way with the barrel of the shotgun and stepped inside the house.

She thought about calling out to see if Grace Claredon answered her, but her gut told her that would be a mistake. If she found the elderly woman alive and well, she would simply apologize for the intrusion. If something had happened to the homeowner, however, she would be giving up any element of surprise that she still had if she made a lot of noise.

She slowly worked her way through the short hallway and into the living room. None of the lights were on, and between the closed blinds on the windows and the heavy cloud cover outside the house was dark. She stopped after every few steps to listen. All that she heard was the rain against the roof and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.

Maggie had been inside the house once before. It had been during one of Mrs. Claredon's many complaints. She had only seen the first floor on that visit. She seemed to remember that the kitchen had the door leading into the basement. It made sense to start at the bottom and work her way up, so she walked over to it and opened it as quietly as possible. To her surprise, the door swung open without a peep.

The outside of the house might have needed work, but the inside was very well-maintained.

She descended the stone steps. Her finger wasn't on the shotgun's trigger as a precaution, but she gripped the weapon tightly and was ready to use it at a moment's notice. She reached the bottom and pulled on a beaded chain to switch on the light.

There was nothing to see. The basement was completely empty. The walls themselves had discoloration about halfway up, and she wondered if the reason nothing was stored there was due to flooding.

She turned off the light and waited for a moment while her eyes readjusted to the dimness. She then returned to the kitchen and crossed over to the staircase that led upstairs. The house was still silent, and her footsteps sounded extremely loud as she ascended.

The second floor landing was clear. She headed towards the first door on her left, passing by a few paintings as she went. They were all nautical in theme, either depicting boats on water or people dressed in sailor outfits.

The door to the first room was open, and with one last look up and down the hallway she stepped inside. Remembering her training, she checked the corners of the room and behind the door to confirm that there wasn't any immediate danger. She was sure that officers in high crime cities were so used to that sort of thing that they automatically did it, but she had to go through a mental checklist to make sure that she was following proper procedure.

She was standing in an office. A large polished wooden desk sat in the middle of the room, with a blank blotter adorning its surface. Two leather chairs were placed in each corner on the left side of the room, with a pair of short bookcases set between them.

On the wall behind the desk were four thin display cases. The tallest case was in the center, and inside of it was a pristinely pressed Navy dress uniform. Two smaller cases, one positioned on each side of the uniform, showed off an incredible number of medals and ribbons. The final case was the widest of the group, and the other cases were set on top of it. Inside of this one was a sword with a gold handle in a black sheath.

Maggie hadn't known that Mr. Claredon had been in the Navy. Judging by the medals and the commendations that were hung on the wall, he must have served in the Korean War. That explained the paintings in the hallway.

She went back out of the room and continued to the next door. This one was closed, and she would have to take one hand off of the shotgun to open it. She leaned the side of her head against the door and listened intently. After a few seconds she gave up. Someone could have been screaming bloody murder in there and she wouldn't have been able to hear it over the wind howling outside.

Backing up a bit, she put her hand on the doorknob and braced herself. She turned the knob and opened the door less than an inch before returning her hand to the shotgun. She used the tip of

her foot to open the door all the way. The room beyond was a bathroom, and it was empty.

There were two more rooms on the second floor. She went to the next door and cautiously opened it. It was a sewing room, complete with a large sewing machine and mannequins for mounting clothing. The window's blinds were open, and the way that the light came through it with the rain pouring down outside made it look like the walls were covered with dark running water. The effect was nauseating. She quickly closed the door.

The final room was used for storage. Stacks of neatly labeled boxes lined the walls, and there were two large wardrobes on the far side. She opened both of them, but she only found rows of coats that smelled of mothballs.

There were no bedrooms. She left the storage room and crossed over to a narrow set of stairs leading up. They had to be up on the third floor.

She put a hand on the banister and jumped as a flash of lightning startled her. For a split second the hallway was bathed in bright light. It faded almost as soon as it appeared, and a moment later it was followed by a rumble of thunder.

Maggie took her hand off of the banister and leaned up against the wall. She took a few moments to steady her nerves. Her finger had unconsciously gone to the shotgun's trigger. She moved it back below the guard and berated herself for being so jumpy. If she wasn't careful, there was a very real chance that she would end up shooting Mrs. Claredon by accident.

There was another flash of lightning, and this time she took it in stride. She once again had control of herself. She gripped the banister, put her right foot on the first step, and with a nod she started to climb the stairs.

She was almost to the point where the floor of the third floor would have completely blocked her view of the lower one when there was a third lightning strike. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of something that made her stop. She turned her head and slowly looked over the hallway below her. There didn't seem to be anything out of place. She waited for it to be illuminated by another bolt of lightning, but when it came it didn't reveal anything, either. Everything was exactly the way that it had been when she had arrived on the house's second floor.

She tried to figure out what it was that she thought that she had seen. She wasn't sure, but she thought that she had caught a glimpse of a dark shape near one of the doors. From where she was standing, though, she could see that the door was still closed and there was nothing near it. She determined that it must have just been some afterimage from the bright flashes.

She continued up to the third floor. The hallway was wider here, and there were only three doors instead of four. One was to the left of the stairs, one was to the right, and the final one was straight ahead at the end of the hall. She chose the room on the left to check first.

It was clearly a bedroom belonging to a young boy. The twin-size bed was pushed up against the large window, its blue comforter neatly draped over it.

A baseball glove hung from one of the bedposts. At the end of the bed was a box filled so high with toys that the lid couldn't close. Two posters were hanging on the wall, both for the old *Super Friends* show. One showed a smiling cartoon Batman and Robin and the other displayed an equally cheerful Superman.

This must have been the room for Mrs. Claredon's youngest son. Maggie didn't know much about him, not even his name, but she knew that he had been killed when the car he was riding in had lost control and crashed into a tree decades ago. Mrs. Claredon had kept his room the way it was for all this time.

She went across the hall to the opposite room. This was also a boy's bedroom, but it was for one that was older. Shelves covered with baseball and football trophies adorned the walls, and a small desk with a reading lamp was placed in one of the corners. There were posters in this room as well, but instead of being for a children's show they were for bands like The Eagles and Led Zeppelin. She smiled slightly. The kid had good taste in music.

She felt a pang of sympathy for Mrs. Claredon. She couldn't imagine the pain of having lost two children, especially at the same time and so soon after her partner had passed away. Somehow the woman had managed to continue on afterward. She wasn't sure that she could have done the same thing if she had been in that position.

There was only the final room at the far end of the hallway left to check. Maggie started towards it. By process of elimination it had to be the master bedroom. She would probably find the old woman there, maybe taking a relaxing afternoon nap. She

would just check to make sure that everything was fine before slipping back out of the house, hopefully without anyone knowing that she had been there.

She adjusted her grip on the shotgun. There was also a chance that she was headed towards something much less innocent.

She opened the door. The room was, as she had suspected, the master bedroom. The bed was nicely made, its blankets tucked in and throw pillows placed at the head. A dresser with a large mirror was on the wall next to the door. A small uncomfortable-looking chair was tucked away in the corner, and the open closet contained clothes hanging from the racks.

There was no one there. Maggie checked under the bed to be absolutely sure, but Mrs. Claredon was nowhere to be found. It didn't make any sense. If the elderly woman had left the house, she would have driven her car. Nothing seemed out of place, though, and with the exception of the broken screen door there hadn't been any signs of something bad having happened.

There was another flash of lightning, and this time Maggie definitely saw something at the edge of her vision. She spun around and brought the shotgun up. Once again she didn't see anything that wasn't exactly where it had been when she had entered the room. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She was sure that she had seen *something*. She lowered the shotgun. It must have been her own reflection in the mirror over the dresser. She was sure that it hadn't been, but there didn't seem to be any other explanation.

The ceiling above her creaked. She looked up and watched as particles of dust floated down from the cracked plaster. That hadn't just been the house settling. Something had moved up above her.

She went back out into the hallway with her head tilted upward. In the middle of the hallway ceiling was a short cord with a plastic ring hanging from it. She could just make out the outline of a trapdoor. It hadn't been obvious from the outside of the house, but it appeared that there was an attic above the third floor.

She stood still and listened for what seemed like an eternity. She couldn't hear anything but the storm outside. After more than a minute had passed, she reached up to grab the ring. She was too short to reach it even on her tiptoes. Carefully setting the shotgun down on the carpet, she jumped up and was just barely able to wrap her fingers around the plastic. The trapdoor opened with a groan, and a set of wooden stairs slid out through the gap.

Retrieving the shotgun, she took one more quick look around the hallway before climbing up. The steps were narrow, and she had to proceed slowly to avoid slipping off. She reached the top and raised her head through the opening just enough to see into the attic.

It was large, extending across the entirety of the floor below it. The ceiling, or more accurately the bottom of the roof, was only about four or five feet from the attic floor. It sloped inward as it approached the walls. It was dark here, even darker than it was on the lower floors. There was only a single window that she could see, and almost no light was coming through it. She didn't dare use her cellphone for more

light. Between her tenuous grip on the ladder and holding the shotgun she couldn't risk it.

There was a muffled sound to her right, and she turned her head towards it. Something was moving near one of the walls, but it was too dark to determine what it was. Ignoring the voice in her head that screamed at her to get out of the house and run as far away as possible, she pulled herself up all the way into the attic. She had to bend over to avoid hitting her head on the roof as she crept towards the movement.

As she drew closer, she found that she was looking at Mrs. Claredon. The woman was sitting up against the wall with her arms wrapped around her legs. She was rocking back and forth slowly. Her mouth was moving, but no words were coming out.

"Mrs. Claredon?" Maggie whispered as she closed the rest of the distance. "Are you all right?"

"Sheriff Grant?" the elderly woman asked quietly. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me. What's going on? Are you hurt? Why are you up here?"

Mrs. Claredon's face contorted as tears began to fall from her eyes. "Oh, Sheriff Grant, you have to go. He's here. You can't be here. He's here."

Maggie set the shotgun down and put her hands on the woman's shoulders. "Hey, calm down, everything's okay. I just went through the entire house. No one's here but you and me."

"No, you're wrong. *He's* here."

“Who, Mrs. Claredon? Who’s here?”

The woman turned her head slightly and raised her hand, pointing a finger over Maggie’s shoulder.
“*Him*. Mister Skitter.”

“What the hell is happening?” Josh asked, sitting down on the dust-covered booth. “What the hell is that thing?”

“Like I said, I have no idea,” Sarah replied as she continued watching the girl through the window.

He put his head in his hands. “So all that stuff that people say about your family is true. You really *are* mixed up with all kinds of weird shit.”

“Hey, I hadn’t even heard of Lamplight Woods two weeks ago. Besides, *you* invited *me* here, remember? Don’t put this on me.”

He looked up at her. “No, hold on, that’s not what I meant. I just meant... I’m sorry. I’m just way out of my depth here.”

“I get it. I’m feeling the same way.”

Sarah closed the curtain and started looking around the trailer for something that might be able to help them. She dug through the drawers in the kitchen and found plenty of silverware and pots and pans, but nothing that was useful. There wasn’t anything in the sitting area, either. Not sure what else to do, she opened the half-pulled curtain leading into the sleeping section.

“The fuck?” she exclaimed in surprise.

“What?” Josh asked as he joined her, his voice steadier than it had been a minute earlier.

The sleeping area was covered in pieces of paper. They were taped to every possible surface, which included the small indentation containing the trailer's toilet. Some of the pages were filled with writing, while others were covered in sketches and drawings. All of them looked like they had been done by a madman frantically scribbling down whatever insanity came to mind.

Sarah's breath caught in her throat. She recognized the handwriting. It was the same handwriting that was in her grandfather's journal.

"Help me gather all these up," she said, taking her backpack off of her shoulders and unzipping it.

"What, these papers?" Josh asked in confusion. "Why?"

She looked up at him. "I promise I'll tell you everything I know later. Right now, I just need you to trust me."

"Trust you? I barely know you. I just met you a few hours ago, Sarah, and I'm already right in the middle of whatever the fuck *this* is."

She looked down at the filthy floor of the trailer. "Yeah."

He sighed. "And yet, for some completely unknown reason... Okay, let's get this all shoved into your backpack so we can get back to figuring out what to do about that thing outside."

Being careful not to tear the pages, they removed the tape from the walls and stacked the papers together as best as they could. Sarah folded the

stack in half and managed to just barely fit it into the backpack next to her grandfather's journal.

She quickly glanced around to make sure that they hadn't missed any of the pages. She had no idea what they were doing in the trailer, or if maybe her grandfather had used it previously, but she didn't have time to worry about that. She zipped up the backpack and looped it over her shoulders.

"What do you think?" Josh asked as he returned to the window. "Do we make a run for it while it's still raining?"

"We don't really know if that's what made her stop coming after us," Sarah pointed out. "It's just our best guess. We could open that door and she could be right on top of us."

"That's true, but I don't see..." He trailed off. "Wait, where did she go?"

Sarah joined him at the window and looked out towards where she had last seen the girl. At first she thought that the shadows under the trees were too dark and the girl was concealed in them, but a flash of lightning lit everything up and made it clear that no one was there. She slowly scanned everywhere that was visible through the small window. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

Josh had moved over to the second window. They looked at each other and he shook his head.

"Maybe she's gone," he suggested, a mixture of hope and disbelief in his voice.

"Or maybe she's trying to bait us," Sarah replied.

“Maybe.” He glanced back out the window. “I don’t think we have much of a choice, though. We can’t stay here forever.”

She chewed on her lip. He was right. If the rain did have something to do with the girl’s reluctance to attack them, they only had so long before it stopped coming down. Even if she really had left, that break in the storm might cause her to return.

Sarah took one last glance around the trailer. She wanted to search every square inch of it for more things that her grandfather may have left behind. Satisfying her curiosity wasn’t worth them being killed, however, so she nodded.

“Okay,” she agreed.

“If we can get to the bikes, we can get back into town faster,” Josh said.

“Let’s do it.”

They moved the refrigerator away from the door. Josh gripped the door handle and put his other hand on the lock. He looked at Sarah expectantly. Taking a deep breath, she nodded.

He flung the door open and they hurried outside. The rain was coming down harder than she had thought, and within seconds she was completely drenched. As they started towards the old abandoned crane it started coming down even harder. The sheets of water were falling so hard that she couldn’t see more than a few feet ahead.

The rain made it extremely difficult to move through the sand. Josh turned to shout something to

her, but it was impossible to hear him over the storm. Seeing her confusion, he pointed off to their left. He was motioning for them to leave the beach and go into the grass instead. She nodded her understanding and they slogged their way out of the sand.

Moving was easier here, but it also brought them closer to the trees. She could just make out the dark shapes in the distance. As they hurried around the lake, she kept glancing towards the woods, expecting to see the terrifying girl coming after them.

They had gone about a third of the way when she saw what she had been looking for. The rain dropped in intensity for just a few seconds, and Sarah shivered as she spotted the girl a few feet inside the trees. She was keeping pace with them, still staying out of the downpour but not letting them get any real distance away from her.

Josh must have seen the girl as well. His face went pale and his jaw tightened. He didn't stop moving, however, and he turned his gaze away from the woods.

Almost immediately his foot slipped in the slick mud. He crashed to the ground hard, his upper body and face striking it with such force that Sarah was sure that he had been knocked out. She stopped and was starting to bend down when he stirred, putting his hands underneath him and shoving himself back to his feet. Blood was running from his nose, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand as they continued along.

They reached their bikes. It was too muddy to use them in the grass, so they carried on towards the trail that they had used to get to the lake.

Something occurred to Sarah. She grabbed Josh's shoulder to stop him.

"We can't go through there!" she yelled over the driving rain. "We'll be under the trees, and she'll be able to get to us."

"Dammit, you're right," he agreed.

"Is there another way that doesn't go through the woods?"

There was a brief hesitation. "Yeah. It's dangerous, but if we're careful we should be okay. This way."

He led the way further around the lake.

A shiver running down her spine, Maggie turned around to look at where Mrs. Claredon was pointing.

The far end of the attic was pitch black. At first she didn't see anything.

The creature suddenly emerged from the shadows, and she raised the shotgun.

The figure was hunched over on all fours to fit below the slanted roof. If it had been standing straight up it would have easily reached nine or ten feet tall. It was very thin and gaunt, giving the impression that it was frail. The skin was a sickly gray. Despite the odd proportions, however, its body was still humanoid in shape.

All five fingers were roughly four feet long and narrowed to sharp points. They cut gouges into the wooden floor as they scraped against it. The sound was like nails raking across a chalkboard.

Its face was grotesque. There didn't appear to be any eyes, but there were indentations where the orbital cavities normally would have been. There was no nose. There was a mouth, however, and it was spread in a wide grin. The teeth were rotted and chipped, and it clicked them together as it moved.

"Mother always told me that Mister Skitter would come for me," Mrs. Claredon moaned from behind her. "She told me that he would come to eat me bit by bit if I was bad. I'm so sorry that I was bad! I didn't mean it!"

Maggie didn't respond. The woman had clearly become unhinged by the appearance of the creature. As she looked at it crawling towards her, she completely understood why.

She aimed the shotgun and fired. It was extremely loud in the enclosed space, and she winced as her ears started ringing. The blast hit the creature directly in the face, and its head jerked hard to the right. Its advance stopped.

She pumped another shell into the chamber and waited, making sure to keep breathing at regular intervals. She refused to lose control of herself and was determined not to panic.

The figure's head turned back towards her. It was still smiling, and there wasn't any damage from the shotgun blast. She knew that she had hit it. She had watched the impact. The shot should have torn its face to shreds, but it hadn't even been fazed. It moved closer.

She pulled the trigger again. The creature once again stopped, but otherwise the shot was, if anything, even less effective than the first. She felt fear beginning to overtake her forced state of calm.

"Please, Mister Skitter!" Mrs. Claredon pleaded. "Please don't hurt me! I'm sorry I sold that land! I'll never do anything like that again!"

The elderly woman pushed Maggie out of the way with surprising strength. The sheriff reached out to try to stop her, but she moved forward and got down on her knees in front of the creature. She folded her hands against her chest like she was a praying child.

“I’m begging you,” she said through heavy sobs. “I know what I did was bad. Just give me another chance. I never should have-”

She was cut off as the creature reached out with one of its long fingers and pushed it straight into her forehead. Mrs. Claredon’s eyes opened wide in surprise, and her mouth kept moving even though no sound was coming out. It had broken through skin and bone so effortlessly that the act seemed almost gentle.

Maggie knew that she was next. Ignoring the growing terror inside of her, she started moving towards the stairs and hatch leading out of the attic. The creature ignored her as it slowly extracted its razor-sharp finger from the dead woman’s head. She got onto the unstable folding stairs and quickly climbed down.

Gripping the shotgun tightly, she hurried towards the stairwell leading to the second floor. The weapon was obviously useless, but just holding it made her feel more in control of the situation. It was a false sense of security, but she would take any sort of security that she could get.

She came to a screeching halt as Mister Skitter appeared in front of her. It was hanging upside down from the ceiling, its head twisted around to look at her and its long fingers dug deep into the walls. It slowly dropped down to the carpeted floor, and as it did so she could see that its legs were dangling from a large crack in the ceiling.

Despite the danger, she couldn’t look away and watched for a moment in fascination. Its body had

crushed and contorted itself enough to get through the crack. It didn't seem to feel any pain or have suffered any injuries from the process. The way it moved was as graceful as any dancer.

Snapping out of her momentary daze, she fired the last shell into it. She was dismayed but not surprised to see that there was once again no effect. She dropped the shotgun. There were three more shells in her pocket, but there was no point in burdening herself with the weapon if it wasn't going to accomplish anything.

Mister Skitter was blocking the stairs, so she turned and darted into the nearest bedroom before slamming the door shut behind her. She turned the lock and quickly moved away from the door. She was standing in the youngest son's room. There wasn't anything substantial to barricade the door with, and there was no way that the ancient lock was going to hold for long.

She took out her phone and quickly dialed a number. She impatiently paced back and forth as it rang. There was a thump out in the hallway.

"Hello?" a man's voice answered.

"Michael, it's Maggie," she said quickly. "Don't talk, just listen. I'm trapped in Grace Claredon's house with this... this *thing* with long sharp fingers, and it can squeeze through stupidly small spaces and-

"Whoa, Maggie, slow down," he interrupted. "I can't follow what you're saying when you talk that fast."

She forced herself to stop pacing. “There’s a monster. It already killed Mrs. Claredon right in front of me and now it’s coming for me. I need to know what to do. How to kill it. It’s got me trapped in a room and it’s going to kill me if I don’t get it first.”

“Fuck. Okay, describe it to me.”

“It’s tall but thin. It’s got to be every bit of nine feet tall. It has a mouth, but the face is blank otherwise. Long super-sharp fingers.”

“Sharp fingers? Like claws or... joint... end...”

The call was breaking up. Maggie took the phone away from her ear and looked at it just in time to see the call disconnect and the message ‘No Signal’ flash on the screen. She tried calling again, but the call wouldn’t go through.

She turned back towards the door. One long finger was beginning to push its way through the small gap between the door and the floor. It was soon joined by a second, and then a third. It wouldn’t be long before Mister Skitter was inside the bedroom.

Josh called for a halt when they reached a river. It ran out from the lake and off to their left. Sarah wasn't able to see how far it ran through the downpour. He motioned her closer and leaned towards her so that she could hear him over the rain.

"We need to be very careful here," he said. "The banks of the river are mostly rock, and it's going to be slippery. Plus, well, *that*."

She followed his gaze and immediately saw what he was talking about. While the river was out in the open, the banks were only a half dozen yards from the tree line. If they got too close, they would be in more trouble than they already were.

She nodded and they continued on. The grass was too close to the trees, and they were forced to traverse the slick rocks. More than once she needed to slow down and lean on her bike like a makeshift crutch as she nearly lost her balance.

The river itself wasn't helping matters. It was moving very fast, its water slapping against the rocks as it rushed by. The intense rain was spurring it on and bringing it to the point of overflowing. Sarah forced herself to turn her attention away from it. With each passing minute they were losing more of the riverbank to the water, and soon it would drive them towards the trees.

She glanced over at the woods. They were close enough that she could see the girl moving through the

trees and underbrush. The blank expression was gone, and instead it had been replaced by one of intense anger and hunger. She was a predator actively stalking them, and if she caught them they were dead.

Sarah realized that she was shaking. The rain was cold, and the storm had lowered the temperature significantly. She was soaked completely through.

“Watch out!” Josh yelled.

Sarah had been concentrating so hard on maintaining her footing that she hadn’t noticed that they had come to a section of the river where the tops of the trees stretched out over the water. The nightmarish girl had, however, and she opened her mouth wide as she darted forward. Her arms were outstretched, and the fingers extending out of her open mouth flexed eagerly.

Without thinking, Sarah gripped her bike in both hands and swung it at her attacker. With inhuman speed, the girl grabbed it and ripped it out of her arms, throwing it against a nearby tree so hard that it nearly broke in half. The girl lunged, and Sarah instinctively took a step back.

Her foot caught on a rock, and she lost her footing. She gasped as she went into the river. Water gushed into her mouth and nose. She felt a hard tug as she was swept up by the current. Struggling to right herself, she managed to get her head back above the surface and spit out the water.

The river was deep enough that her feet didn’t touch the bottom. She kicked out as hard as she

could to try to fight against the current, but it was too strong and she wasn't able to make any progress.

Josh's hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed her right arm. She managed to twist around and grip his wrist with her other hand. He began to pull her back onto the riverbank. She could feel him straining against both the current and her weight.

Her eyes widened in horror as she saw the girl coming up behind him, her hands outstretched like claws. Sarah shouted a warning, but he either couldn't hear her or was too focused on pulling her out of the river. There wasn't time to try again. Gritting her teeth, she changed her grip on his wrist and pulled as hard as she could.

Josh yelped in surprise as he fell forward and plunged into the cold water. The current grabbed them both, and they were swept away down the river. His head broke the surface next to her and he coughed violently. He looked at her in shock before turning his face towards the treeline.

The girl was still pursuing them. The tree cover had thinned out overhead, however, and she was forced to keep a greater distance.

Sarah turned her attention back to the river. They weren't going to be able to get back to shore, at least not yet. She instead concentrated on keeping her head above the water and staying in the center of the river as much as possible. She reasoned that there would be less debris to worry about in the deepest areas. That didn't mean that it was completely clear, though. She felt a number of painful impacts with

rocks and submerged branches as they continued forward.

She wasn't sure how long they had been in the water when she felt something catch her arm. She came to an abrupt halt. She looked over to find Josh holding onto her as he slowly headed towards the right bank. It took a moment for her to figure out what was happening. He was quite a bit taller than she was, and they must have come to a shallow enough section of the river for his feet to touch the bottom.

A few seconds later her feet scraped against the hard river floor, and with some difficulty they were able to pull themselves up onto the riverbank. She knew that they needed to keep going and that every moment that passed brought them closer to the end of the storm, but she was exhausted. The exertion from being trapped in the water had drained her.

She grunted and pushed herself up off the sharp rocks. It didn't matter that it felt like her limbs were made of lead. All that mattered was getting away from the thing that was stalking them.

"We got lucky," Josh said as they continued on.

"What?" she asked, perplexed that he would even suggest that they were somehow lucky after what had just happened.

He pointed ahead of them. Sarah felt the blood drain out of her face. Directly in front of them, the river cut off as the water plunged over a large rock outcropping. It was at least a fifteen foot drop. If they had gone over the edge at the speed they had been traveling at and had struck the rocks and debris at the bottom...

She shook her head firmly. Nothing good would come from thinking about that.

The riverbank angled sharply downward next to the falls. Josh took her hand as they slowly half-walked, half-slid down the rocky path. They managed to reach the bottom without incident.

“We’re almost there,” he told her. “Only about half a mile to go.”

They picked up their pace and hurried onward. Even over the rain Sarah could hear the girl crashing through the nearby forest. She felt her jaw tighten. She kept expecting the girl to leap out at them.

“There!” Josh yelled, his face lighting up.

They had reached the end of the woods. They passed by the last of the trees and emerged just outside of downtown Lamplight Woods. The river they were following continued on around the town; as the downpour lightened noticeably, she could see where the water ran into the tiered waterfall she had visited on her first night in town.

She turned back towards the woods. The crashing had stopped, and there was no sign of the girl.

Maggie watched as more of Mister Skitter's fingers forced themselves through the crack under the door. It would only be a few moments before it was inside the bedroom. She couldn't be there when that happened.

Not sure what else to do, she hurried over to the bedroom's single window and attempted to open it. It clearly hadn't been opened in quite some time, and she had to pull as hard as she could to get it to move. Once it did start moving along its track, it let out a squeal that made her grit her teeth.

She ignored the rain and stuck her head out the window. Down below was a row of bushes, but there was no way it would be enough to cushion her fall from a three story drop. Going out the window wasn't going to be an option.

She paused. Maybe that wasn't *entirely* accurate. Just below and to the left of the window was a small overhang. It was most likely just for aesthetics, to make the house look more pleasing from the outside. It probably wouldn't support her weight.

The door shuddered as the first full arm made it under. The sharp fingers dug into the wood floor as Mister Skitter used them to pull itself through at a faster pace.

She was out of options. Without waiting long enough to talk herself out of it, she lowered herself out of the window and onto the overhang.

She could feel it flex a bit under her weight, but by some miracle it held. Pressing herself as tightly against the house as she could, she moved slowly down the overhang to the corner of the house. It continued around the side. After taking a moment to convince herself that there was no other choice, she stepped around the corner.

She very nearly fell. It was only at the last possible second that she managed to grab onto a shutter and right herself.

One of Mister Skitter's grotesquely misshapen hands lashed out of the window, the points of its fingers driving themselves into the side of the house less than an inch from her arm. They sank into the siding and wood underneath like there was no resistance at all. Moving as fast as she dared, she sidled all the way around the corner and out of sight of the fingers.

There was another window on this side of the house. She looked inside and found that she was overlooking the staircase that led from the third floor down to the second. This window didn't slide open; in fact, it looked like it wasn't intended to be opened at all.

The overhang didn't go much further, and there weren't any other windows on this section of the house. Deciding quickly on a course of action, Maggie gripped the window frame to steady herself and used her right foot to strike the glass as hard as she could given the awkward angle she was at. There was an audible *crack*, but it didn't break. She tried again, and this time both the glass and the wooden frame shattered inward.

Silently thanking the Claredon family for having installed such a poor quality window, she used the bottom of her shoe to clear away the glass shards. When she had finished, she quickly but carefully reentered the house. There was a small drop down to the landing, and she landed with a thud.

She turned her head towards the top of the stairs and saw Mister Skitter grinning down at her. It must have heard her break the window. It started down towards her, and she turned away from it as she hurried down to the second floor with it right behind her.

She gasped in pain as one of its fingers jabbed into the back of her ankle. It barely pierced the clothing and skin, but it was enough to send a fiery sensation through the muscle. Instead of slowing down, she used the handrail to push herself forward. She felt the fingertip slide out, followed by a bloom of warmth as blood began trickling into her sock.

There was a crash as Mister Skitter arrived at the bottom of the stairs. It lashed out again, but Maggie had been anticipating it and ducked out of the way just in time. The fingers tore into one of the paintings on the wall instead. She knew that she wouldn't be able to avoid the creature for much longer.

She hurried towards the stairwell leading down to the first floor, but Mister Skitter leaped past her and blocked her way. It was so tall that even with the higher ceilings on this floor it couldn't stand up straight. With it blocking the way downstairs, she was once again forced to enter one of the rooms and slam the door shut behind her.

This time she was in the office. She went over to the window and looked out, but although she was closer to the ground now it was still too far of a drop. There also weren't any shrubs to help break her fall.

She turned back around and saw the familiar fingers beginning to sprout from under the door. In desperation she looked around for something, anything, that she could use to defend herself.

Her eyes fell on the old Navy sword inside of the bottom display case.

The case wasn't locked, just latched with a small hook. She released it and removed the sword. She was afraid that it was only a ceremonial sword and that it wouldn't be functional, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that the blade was sharp when she pulled it free from the sheath.

Placed neatly on the right side of the desk blotter was a small silver letter opener. Deciding that it couldn't hurt, she picked it up as well. The point was sharp. While she still wasn't confident about her chances, at least now she could put up a fight.

She remembered just how ineffective the shotgun had been. There wasn't much hope that a thin sword and a letter opener were going to do any better against Mister Skitter. She pushed those thoughts down. Her father hadn't raised her to be a quitter.

The fingers started to retract back out from under the door. She watched in confusion as they disappeared completely out of view. Mister Skitter hadn't known that she had armed herself, and she doubted that it would have cared if it did. She also doubted that it had simply decided that she wasn't

worth the effort. Had it found another way into the room?

She heard the sound of a car door being shut outside. It was barely audible over the rain, but she was sure that she had heard it. Reluctantly turning away from the door, she crossed over to the window and looked out. A car had pulled into the driveway behind her vehicle, and the driver had gotten out. He was wearing a black raincoat with the hood pulled up, and he was slowly approaching the front door. The man raised his face upward for a split second. She recognized him immediately.

“Dammit, Michael,” she muttered. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”

Michael stepped up onto the porch and pulled his hood back, causing the accumulated water trapped in the folds to splash down onto the wood. The rain had gotten even more intense as he had approached the Claredon residence. At one point he had nearly lost control of the car as the tires had started to hydroplane, but he had managed to regain control and continue on. He hoped that he wasn't too late.

He turned the doorknob and was somewhat surprised to find that the door was unlocked. He quickly unbuttoned his raincoat and pulled a long knife out of his belt. The blade was over ten inches long, and the wooden handle fit comfortably in his hand.

He had been caught by surprise when he and Maggie had encountered the possessed Benjamin Henderson. Now that he knew that he was dealing with demons, however, he was determined to be prepared. The knife's blade was made of pure silver, one of the only materials known to be able to hurt a demon. He had also brought along a few other tools just in case.

Nodding once to himself, he opened the door and went into the house. He was standing in an entryway, with the living room on his right and a staircase leading upstairs to his left. He closed the door behind him and waited as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The house was silent.

Maggie had said that Grace Claredon had called the creature Mister Skitter. He had recognized the name but couldn't place where he had heard it until he had been on the road. It was from an old local legend about a creature that would appear to find people that had proved themselves to be a bad person or committed some terrible crime. According to the story, Mister Skitter would claim them and drag them down to Hell.

Parents had used the story to try to scare their kids into behaving for generations. Even in a place like Lamplight Woods it was considered to just be some creepy tale to tell around the campfire. Apparently there was some truth to it.

He turned his head towards the stairs as he heard the sound of movement on the floor above him. The ceiling moaned as someone walked across it. A moment later there was a creaking noise as a door opened.

Michael raised the knife and waited as quiet footsteps began to descend the stairs. There were long pauses between each step, like someone or something was being very careful to make as little noise as possible. It was too dark to see more than halfway up the stairs, and he felt his muscles tense as he waited.

He sighed in relief as Maggie appeared out of the shadows. She was holding a sword of all things in her right hand, and what looked to be a letter opener in her left. It was such a strange image that it took him a moment to process it. He opened his mouth to say something, but she shook her head and he closed

it. She continued on slowly until she reached the bottom of the stairs.

It's still here, she mouthed at him.

He nodded in understanding. They had to get out of the house and come up with some sort of plan. He turned back towards the front door.

Mister Skitter was standing directly in front of it.

Maggie had said it was tall, but he hadn't fully understood what that meant until now. It loomed over him, its thin body spread out to completely block the doorway. It didn't have eyes or a nose, but its mouth was open and pulled back in a menacing grin that reminded him of Billy Baxter's. Its long arms ended in hands with extremely long and extremely sharp fingers.

Maggie hadn't been able to see it from her angle as she came down the stairs, but now that she could she shouted a warning. Her yell snapped him out of his shock. He quickly moved towards the living room in an attempt to get some space between him and the creature. He caught a glimpse of her ducking back into the stairwell just before he lost sight of her behind the dividing wall.

He saw motion above him. He threw himself to one side just in time to avoid the razor-like fingers slashing down at him. Mister Skitter was crawling across the ceiling like a spider, its fingers and feet dug deep into it as it moved with incredible speed.

It lashed out at him again with its free hand. He jerked away from it and they passed so close to his face that he felt the air move across his skin. The

fingers pierced into a couch with a gaudy floral pattern before quickly being extracted.

“Michael!” Maggie called urgently from the entryway.

Mister Skitter turned its head towards her. Realizing this might be his only chance and that he wouldn't be able to reach the creature with the knife, he dug into one of the raincoat's pockets and pulled out a small cloth bag. He unwound the silk string keeping it closed and tossed it up at the monster. The contents burst out in a white cloud as the bag made contact.

Mister Skitter screeched in surprise and pain. It was an inhuman sound that made Michael's blood run cold. It dropped from the ceiling and dashed out of the living room through the second doorway so fast that he almost couldn't follow its movements.

“What the hell was that?” Maggie demanded as she joined him in the living room.

“That was definitely Mister Skitter,” he replied, looking her over to make sure that she was all right.

“Yeah, I got that. I was asking what you did to it to make it run out of here like a bat out of hell.”

“Oh, right. I hit it with a combination of salt and silver shavings. It's not enough to kill something like that, but it's enough to hurt like a bitch.”

“Got any more of it?”

“Afraid not. Nice sword.”

“Thanks. I’m thinking of quitting my job to become a pirate.”

There was a crash towards the back of the house. They looked at each other and left the living room without saying a word. As Michael entered the hallway he could see that the back door beyond the kitchen doorway had been ripped off.

He walked over to it and looked out into the backyard. Mister Skitter was gone. All that was left was a series of holes in the ground leading away from the house. They were roughly the same size as the ones that were currently in the living room ceiling.

“Is it over?” Maggie asked, joining him at the door.

“Looks like it,” Michael said. “For now, anyway. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She winced. “Well, mostly. It got me in the back of the ankle, but it barely broke the skin. I’ll be fine.”

“Show me.”

She gave him a confused look but didn’t argue. He looked closely at the small puncture wound. There was a small trickle of blood leading from it down into her sock, but the bleeding itself had stopped.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“I hope so,” he replied. “Look, I don’t want to scare you, but some creatures can track you once they’ve gotten a taste of your blood. Assuming Mister Skitter is a demon like the monster that possessed the Henderson kid, it will be able to.”

“Great. Just fucking great. Is there anything that we can do about it?”

“I don’t know. I’ll do some research. We’ve got some time, though. It’s hurt, and it will need a while to recover.”

Maggie sighed. “How long?”

“No idea. This isn’t exactly well-charted territory. I’d guess a couple of days. No more than a week.”

“I stand by what I said, then. Just fucking great.” She straightened up. “Let’s hope that you find something that will help.”

He nodded. “Right. I’ll go back to Forgotten Tales and start working on it.”

There was a loud crash as a large piece of plaster fell from the ceiling of the living room and landed on a glass table, shattering it into hundreds of pieces. The holes from Mister Skitter’s fingers had caused a lot of damage to the area, and it had given out. They both watched the cloud of dust that was floating through the air.

“Want to come over for dinner?” Maggie asked.

Sarah stood in the shower so long that the hot water was starting to turn cold when she finally turned it off. By the time she had gotten home, her lips had started to turn blue. She had needed to practically boil the skin off of her bones to warm up. Feeling much better, she sighed happily as she dried herself off.

Her father hadn't been home when she had gotten back. That was a very good thing, as she wasn't ready to talk about what she and Josh had been through just yet. She knew that she would eventually have to sit down and tell him about the encounter with the terrifying little girl and the creature inside of her. Before she did that, though, she needed time to process it all.

She glanced in the mirror as she put on fresh clothes. She had also promised to tell Josh everything that had been going on. He had saved her life at least twice in one day, and he had put a lot of trust in her even though he barely knew her. She owed it to him, and besides, her gut was telling her that she could confide in him.

She nodded to herself, strands of wet red hair flipping in front of her face. She would have her talk with Josh first, then they could both talk to her father. That way everyone would be on the same page.

She left the bathroom and went into her bedroom. Mira was standing on the nightstand, watching her in such a way that it made her feel like it knew more

about what had happened to her than it should have. She scratched the animal behind the ears.

“Quite a day,” she said with a smile.

Looking out the window to make sure that her father was still gone, she pulled her backpack out from underneath her bed. She had dried it off with a hairdryer as best as she could, but it was still damp. She carefully unzipped it and removed the pile of papers from inside.

Her heart sank. The folded stack was a mess; she doubted that any of it would be salvageable. She went over to her closet and pushed all the clothes hanging in it to one side. Using a small tape dispenser she had borrowed from the kitchen, she carefully separated out each individual page from the stack and taped them up inside the closet to allow them to dry. The pages covered almost every available inch, much like they had inside the trailer.

She sighed. The only thing that she could do was wait to see what was still legible after the pages dried. She closed the closet door and returned to the backpack.

Her grandfather’s journal had managed to come out of the ordeal in better shape than the papers. There was some water damage on the edges of the pages, and the leather was going to be a lost cause when it dried out, but almost everything was still readable. She slid the journal between the mattress and boxspring before shoving the backpack under the bed.

She picked up her phone from where she had left it on the bed. Only weeks earlier her old phone had

been turned in for a new model, and luckily for her the one she had now was water resistant. She had carefully dried it off, and with the exception of a few small dark spots on the screen it seemed to be in working order.

She tapped on the screen to wake the phone and brought up Josh's number. He had given it to her before they had parted. She hesitated with her finger hovering over the Call button. The kind of conversation that they needed to have was the type that should be done in person. Inviting him over to Forgotten Tales didn't seem like a good idea. Maybe she could go over to his house instead.

She turned off the phone screen and tossed it onto her pillow with a sigh. What was the best way to tell someone that everything from magic to Bigfoot was real, and oh, by the way, your family has been the ones to stop these things that go bump in the night? It wasn't like they made a greeting card for that.

She squinted slightly. *Was Bigfoot real?* What about the Loch Ness Monster? She had a ton of questions now that she had started down the rabbit hole.

She heard her father call her name from downstairs. She jumped in surprise; she had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't heard him get back. Grabbing her phone, she left the room and headed downstairs.

"What's up, Dad?" she asked as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“We’ve been invited over to dinner at Sheriff Grant’s place,” he replied, hanging the raincoat he had been wearing up on a hook in the kitchen.

“Oh yeah?”

He must have heard something in her voice because he turned to look at her curiously. “Yeah. it’s not a requirement, though. I’m going to go over so that I can discuss a few things with Maggie, but you don’t have to come along if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Sarah replied, thinking fast. “She seems really nice. It’s just that I got caught out in the rain earlier, and I’m not really feeling up to going anywhere.”

“That explains the wet hair. Are you sick? I’ll stay if you need me to.”

“No, Dad, I feel fine.” She hoped the smile that she gave him was convincing. “I’m just a bit tired and sore. I’ll be good to go in the morning.”

“All right, if you’re sure,” he said. “There’s food in the fridge when you get hungry. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Have a good time.”

He gave her a half-smile before surprising her with a hug. While they were close, they hadn’t hugged much since she had gotten older. She returned the gesture awkwardly.

“What was that for?” she asked when they let go.

“I don’t know, exactly,” her father admitted with a slightly embarrassed shrug. “There’s just some things

going on with this case, and... Well, it's made me remember how grateful I am that you're the person that you've become."

Sarah felt herself blush. "Come on, Dad."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he said with a smile and a wave of his hand. "You're too old for affection from your ancient doddering fool of a father."

She laughed. "Yep, exactly. Now go on, get to your fancy dinner at the nursing home."

"I'm off. Love you."

"Love you too, Dad." She thought of something. "Hey, before you go, quick question."

"What's up?"

"Is the Loch Ness Monster real?"

"It's not. Weirdly, though, both Bessie in Lake Erie and Champ in Lake Champlain are."

Sarah waited until she heard him backing out of the driveway to take out her phone. She quickly dialed and waited impatiently as it rang.

"Hello?" Josh answered after the third ring.

"Hey, it's Sarah," she said. "Can you come over so that we can have that talk?"

Maggie was waiting outside when Michael arrived at her house. She waved as he got out of the car and raised the wine glass she was holding in her other hand in a sort of salute. He smiled and nodded at her.

“Thanks for coming,” she said, walking down the short stone path to meet him.

“Thanks for having me,” he countered. “I am what can best be described as a terrible cook, so it’s been a long time since I’ve had an actual home-cooked meal.”

“You’re in for a treat, then, because Jenni’s cooking is amazing. That’s very good for me, since it sounds like you and I are on the same level of cooking skills. Is Sarah not coming?”

“She’s going to sit this one out. She’s had a hard day.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Haven’t we all? Speaking of which, I need to ask you a favor.”

“Yeah, of course. What’s up?”

She looked a bit uncomfortable. “I haven’t actually told Jenni about everything that’s been going on. You know, about the demons and such. I’ve just told her that I can’t talk about things because it’s an ongoing police investigation.”

“She’s okay with that?”

“Yeah, it’s not a problem. It’s come up before. Not involving anything like this, of course, but you get what I mean.”

“Not a problem,” Michael assured her. “I haven’t told Sarah, either. There’s no point in scaring her when she’s not involved with what’s going on.”

Maggie nodded. “Exactly my thoughts. There’s something else that I wanted to tell you as well. Back before that creature killed her, Mrs. Claredon said something strange. She told Mister Skitter that she was sorry that she had sold some land.”

“Any idea what she meant by that?”

“No, but tomorrow I’m going to dig into the town records and see if I can find a bill of sale with her name on it.”

He scratched his chin. “There’s something I should tell you, too. I talked to... to an expert on the type of thing that we’ve been seeing. He believes that what’s happening is that demons are being implanted into these children. Whoever is behind this is creating human/demon hybrids.”

“Why in the fuck would anyone want to do *that*?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I have a theory.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Well let’s hear it.”

“I think it might be to make it easier to control and... *shape* them.”

“I don’t think that I want to know the answer to this, but what do you mean when you say ‘shape’ them?”

He hesitated. "This is total guess work, but we were just attacked by Mister Skitter. A character from a local legend that, as far as I know, has never gone beyond Lamplight Woods."

"So the person made the demon become something recognizable," Maggie said, catching on to his line of thinking. "Something that a lot of people in Lamplight Woods would recognize."

"That's my theory."

"You know what that means, don't you?"

"What?"

"It means that whoever is behind this has to be a local, since that would be the only way they would know about the Mister Skitter legend." She shook her head. "On that pleasant note, why don't we head inside before the mosquitoes eat us alive?"

Michael followed her back up the path and into the house. It was a ranch-style house that had been decorated with a southwestern theme. He followed Maggie's example and slipped off his shoes.

A woman stepped out of the kitchen with a smile. She had the body of an athlete, tall and slender but with smooth muscles like a swimmer. Her dark hair was pulled back in a bun, and there was sweat on her face from the heat of the kitchen.

"Hello," she said pleasantly.

"Michael, this is Jenni Grant," Maggie introduced her. "Jenni, this is Michael Dyer."

“It’s nice to meet you, Michael,” Jenni said. “Maggie has told me so very little about you.”

She said it in such a way that it was clear that she was teasing her wife. Michael smiled. He instantly liked her.

“Well, if it helps, she hasn’t said much about you, either,” he said.

“Pardon me for trying to keep my work and personal life separate,” Maggie said with mock exasperation. “Let’s all gang up on the poor little sheriff.”

They all talked together while Jenni finished getting dinner put together. Michael didn’t know what they were having, but judging from the smells coming out of the kitchen it was worlds better than anything he could have come close to making. He smiled to himself as he considered that maybe it was better that Sarah hadn’t come along. She already mocked his feeble cooking skills at every opportunity. Having something great to compare them to would only make that mocking worse.

He hadn’t really gotten to know any of the people that he worked with back in California, at least not outside of work. He certainly hadn’t been invited over for dinner by any of them. Different departments throughout the state used him at different times, so there wasn’t much time spent with any individual person before he would be called away to the next crime scene.

Being back in Lamplight Woods had its downsides. It brought up a lot of memories that he would have preferred to stay buried, and he had only

been back a few days and was already neck deep in a case involving some truly unpleasant things. Despite his reservations, though, he had to admit that a part of him had missed the small town atmosphere. He had definitely missed sharing conversations with actual adults outside of work.

“So, Michael,” Jenni said as she took a large baking pan out of the oven. “Maggie has been hush-hush about the case that you two are working on, but I’m guessing it has to do with those missing children?”

Michael had been taking a sip from a glass of water, and he nearly choked on it. He glanced over at Maggie for guidance about what he should say. She was staring at her wife with a glare.

“I told you that we can’t talk about it,” Maggie said firmly.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Jenni replied with a dismissive wave. “I’m not asking for details. I’m just wondering if you think that you’ll be able to find them or not.”

She turned her back to set down the baking pan, and Michael clearly saw Maggie mouth the word *mayor*. He nodded shortly in understanding. Mayor Dilfer must have been making sure that the details of the children’ bedrooms hadn’t leaked out into the usual small town gossip pool. If the public had known about the large amounts of blood at each crime scene, the discussion wouldn’t have been about disappearances. It would have been about child murders.

The irony, of course, was that it looked like these actually *were* disappearances. The children were still

out there. They just weren't in the same condition they had been when they had left.

He thought back to Mister Skitter. It was likely one of the possessed children, one further along in his or her transformation than Benjamin Harrison had been. There hadn't been anything left of the original child. The grim reality was that not all of the missing children could be saved. Maybe none of the ones still out there could be.

"I hope so," he said truthfully. "It's a... complicated case."

"It's all so horrible," Jenni said with a shudder. "Those poor children. They must be so scared to death. Not to mention their parents are worried out of their minds. I ran into Morrigan Clay earlier today, and she was telling me that everyone who comes to her place is freaked out."

"Who's that?"

"Oh, right, I forgot. Maggie says that you haven't lived in Lamplight Woods for a long time. Morrigan runs a daycare out of her house over on Clarkson Street. She knows pretty much everyone in town with kids. The disappearances have hit her pretty hard."

"Hold on," Michael said slowly. "You're saying that this person knows all of the children that have disappeared, as well as their parents?"

Jenni shook her head. "I know what you're thinking, but I've known her all of my life. She wouldn't do anything to hurt those kids. She loves them, and she loves living in Lamplight Woods."

Besides, this is a small town. Everybody knows everybody.”

He had to admit that she had a point. There must be a lot of people in town with some connection to all of the missing children.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Maggie said as she crossed her arms. “There’s always been a little something off about Morrigan Crane to me.”

“And that has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I had a crush on her before we got together, right?” Jenni replied, matching her expression.

“Of course not. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh. Right.”

“Even if it *did*, and it absolutely does not, it’s not like I would be the only one prone to a bit of jealousy. You’re the one that always brings up me dating Wade Haskins in high school.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference. Wade Haskins is a tool.”

They laughed, and Michael felt himself smiling along with them.

Josh sat on the couch silently while Sarah told him everything that she had learned and experienced over the past few days. She made it a point not to leave anything out, going through the order of events exactly as they had happened. When she finally stopped talking, he had a look on his face that made it clear he was mentally working his way through what she had said. She was pleased to see that it wasn't a look of total disbelief instead.

She had a few advantages there, of course. He had been with her during the events at the lake, and she imagined it was hard to be a skeptic after being attacked by a girl with hands coming out of her mouth. Not to mention the presence of Mira, who was sitting on the other end of the couch from him. He kept looking over at it like he had no idea what to think of it. For its part, Mira seemed content to just stare right back at him.

"Wow," he said finally, sitting back and running a hand over his face. "Just... wow."

"No kidding," she agreed.

"I'm going to need some time to process all of this."

She nodded. "Yeah, I get it. I don't know what to think about most of it myself. I completely get it if this is too much."

He blinked. "Sorry, I didn't follow that. Too much?"

“Yeah, you know, like if it’s *too much*. You can just walk away. No hard feelings.”

“What? No. I don’t want to do that. Unless you want me to?”

She shook her head. “No. I just don’t want you to feel like you’re somehow obligated now, or whatever. You’re not.”

Josh stood up and put a hand on her shoulder with a small smile. “I know that I’m not. This is a lot to take in, but it’s weird. I’m not all that surprised by it. Lamplight Woods has always seemed... I’m not sure how to put this. It’s always seemed a little *off*. Now I know that I haven’t just been imagining it.”

She smiled up at him. Despite what she had said, she was relieved that he hadn’t walked right out the door. Having someone else to share this with felt good.

“So I guess the question is where do we go from here,” he said, sitting back down on the couch. “Hopefully it involves staying as far away from the Well Witch as possible.”

“Um, Well Witch?” Sarah asked, furrowing her brow.

“I might have kind of named the psycho girl from the lake. She reminded me of an old scary story that my dad used to tell me when I was little. Somewhere in Lamplight Woods there’s supposed to be a well where the townspeople drowned a witch. The legend says that if you look down into the water, she’ll climb out of it and wear you like a skin suit.”

“What a lovely story.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who came up with it.”

She snorted. “All right, the Well Witch it is. I guess we have to call her *something*. I don’t want to go near that place again any more than you do, so I don’t think we should start there.”

She reached under her seat and produced her grandfather’s journal. The leather had hardened from having absorbed so much water, and it wouldn’t be long before it would start to crack. She handed it over to Josh and watched as he slowly opened it.

“I want to figure out what my grandfather was working on,” she said. “Why did he make that prison thing under the backyard? Why were there papers written in his handwriting in that trailer? He clearly thought that whatever he was doing was important.”

“Can’t you ask your dad about it?” Josh asked.

She shook her head. “He didn’t know about the underground prison, so he’s just as clueless about all of this as I am. Or I guess we are, now that you know. Besides, Dad and my grandfather had a rough relationship.”

“How so?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Dad doesn’t really talk about it much, but I do know that my grandfather used to yell at him and hit him a lot. I don’t want to involve him in this part of things until I absolutely have to. There’s no point in opening old wounds. Not yet, anyway.”

“You’re probably right. You do still want to tell him about the Well Witch, correct?”

“Yeah, definitely. That’s not the kind of thing that you keep hidden. I thought that maybe we could talk to him about it together?”

It was Josh’s turn to look uncomfortable. “Together?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just haven’t met your dad before, and the first thing he’s going to hear me say is that I took his daughter to a place where a monster tried to murder her.”

She grinned. “Think of it this way: it’s an incredible icebreaker.”

“Have you noticed this phrase?” he asked, pointing at the journal.

“Yes. Flesh to form. No clue what it means.”

“No. Well, yes, that’s all over the place, but I mean this other phrase. The one written in small print in the margin.”

Josh handed her back the journal and pointed to the bottom right corner of one of the pages. Written in tiny print and almost completely hidden by the book gutter was a series of words. It was so small that she hadn’t noticed it when she had gone through the pages herself. She held the journal up closer to her face to get a better look.

“Open doors lead to horrors,” she read out loud.

“Not the most pleasant sentiment,” Josh pointed out. “Any idea what it means?”

“Nope. Another mystery to throw on top of the giant pile of mysteries.”

He took the journal back from her and continued to slowly flip through the pages. She watched him for a few moments before sighing and rubbing the back of her neck. It had been an exhausting day, and the physical strain of their escape from the lake had caught up to her. She felt like a bus had been dropped on her.

“Here’s something I recognize,” Josh said suddenly.

She moved over to the couch and sat down next to him to look at the page he was indicating. It was one of the odd drawings that appeared throughout the journal. The picture was shaped like a teardrop set on its side with a square in the middle.

“You recognize *that*?” Sarah asked in disbelief.

“I think so,” he replied. “It looks like the marker stone outside of the Fordham Cabin.”

“The what?”

“The Fordham Cabin. It’s a historical site near the bridge leading out of town. One of the town’s founding fathers, Jeremiah Fordham, built his home near the creek. The town still maintains it. This drawing looks like the stone marker that sits in front of it.”

Sarah smiled slightly. “You know what this means, right, Josh?”

“Tell me.”

“It means we have a place to start. Have any plans for tomorrow morning?”

He made a face. “I do, actually. I have to drive my grandmother to a doctor’s appointment. I should be free after that.”

“Yeah, not a problem. Noon it is.”

“Good. I’ll swing by and pick you up after I’ve got her back to our house.”

“Oh, your grandmother lives with your family?”

Josh smiled, but there wasn’t any mirth behind it. “My grandmother *is* my family. She took me in when my parents died.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “Oh, Josh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Nah, it’s fine. You had no way of knowing. It’s been a long time since it happened anyway. Eight years this coming August.”

“Still, I’m sorry. Can... can I ask what happened?”

He looked down at his feet, and she worried that she had upset him. She wasn’t sure what to say, though, so for a moment there was silence. Finally he raised his head and looked at her.

“My mom killed my dad with a screwdriver,” he said quietly. “Came up behind him and stabbed it into his neck. She had some mental problems. We thought the medication she was taking was working, but... Anyway, it must have shocked her back into

lucidity, because after she saw what she had done, she went upstairs and shot herself in the head with my dad's gun."

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but no words came to mind. Josh looked away and stared off into the distance. His face looked haunted.

"So, yeah," he said, gathering himself. "Before I go, why don't we see if those pages from the trailer have dried out?"

“All that I’m saying,” Maggie said as she set down her wine glass, “is that I did you a huge favor.”

“Oh did you now,” Jenni replied, pushing her plate back.

“I absolutely did. If I hadn’t married you, you would have been stuck with that dreadful last name for the rest of your life.”

Michael watched the two of them playfully banter back and forth. Dinner had been excellent, and he had massively overeaten. He would likely pay for that later, but for the moment he felt comfortable and satisfied.

“What was your maiden name?” he asked.

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” Jenni said quickly.

“It really was,” Maggie disagreed. Go on. Tell him your maiden name.”

Jenni rolled her eyes. “It was Spunkmeyer.”

Michael snorted before he could stop himself.

“See?” Maggie said triumphantly. “I told you it was bad.”

“I see how it is,” Jenni declared with mock indignation. “I come home from work and slave away in the kitchen for you two, and in return you gang up on me.”

Maggie's phone rang. She dug her cellphone out of her pocket and looked at the screen for a moment. With a frown, she pushed back her chair and stood up before walking over to the far side of the living room to answer the call.

"That would be work," Jenni said as she reached over to retrieve the wine bottle.

"I imagine that it must be hard to be on-call twenty-four seven for the entire town," Michael said.

"Yeah. It didn't used to be. There weren't all that many crimes in Lamplight Woods, and the ones that did happen were always minor. A couple of drunks getting into a fight, some kid toilet papering a house, that sort of thing. Recently, though... It's been constant, and the crimes have been worse."

"I imagine the missing children have been keeping her busy."

"That's some of it, yeah, but not all of it." She refilled her glass and put the bottle back on the table. "Ever since around the time SMR came to town, things have really started going downhill."

"How so?"

Before she could answer, Maggie hung up the phone and went into the back bedroom. Excusing herself, Jenni followed her and for a few minutes Michael was alone. He awkwardly waited in silence for them to reemerge.

Maggie was wearing her uniform when she came back into the living room. She adjusted the gun holster around her waist and nodded to herself.

“Sorry to cut things short,” she said. “There’s been a shooting downtown.”

“Seriously?” Michael asked in surprise.

“Yeah, I know. There hasn’t been a shooting here in Lamplight Woods for over twenty years.”

“Do you want me to come along?”

Maggie hesitated. He knew what was going through her head. Working with him on a case that the mayor had assigned to him as a consultant was one thing, but bringing him into an active crime scene on a different matter was quite another. He belatedly realized that even just asking her might have crossed a line.

“I can’t in good conscience take a civilian to a crime scene with a shooter that’s still on the loose,” she said finally.

“I get it,” he assured her. “I completely understand.”

“No, you don’t. Stand up and be quiet before I talk myself out of this.”

He looked at her quizzically as he did what he was told. She stepped closer and put her hand on his shoulder. He was once again struck by the difference in their heights.

“Michael Dyer,” she said in a serious voice, “I hereby deputize you. There. Now I’m not taking a civilian with me.”

“Is deputizing even still a thing?” he asked, only half-kidding.

“Technically, yes. I don’t think it’s ever actually been used here in Lamplight Woods, but it *is* legal for me to do. There are some ground rules that come with this, though.”

“Okay.”

“First off, I get that you’ve worked forensics for a long time now, but you’re not a trained police officer. You need to follow my lead. If I tell you to do something, you do it. No questions asked. Agreed?”

He nodded. “Yes, absolutely.”

“Good. Second, let me deal with the shooter. I’ll let you know if I need any assistance, but unless I tell you otherwise I only want you to help stop onlookers from interfering and to keep your eyes open.”

He nodded again.

“The last thing I need from you is to keep your head down. I don’t want to have to explain to your daughter why her father didn’t come home. Play it as safe as possible.”

“You’d better do the same,” Jenni said, coming out of the bedroom and wiping her eyes.

Maggie went over to her and gave her a quick hug. The sheriff whispered something into her ear before letting go. She led the way out of the house with Michael close at her heels.

They headed towards downtown in Maggie’s car. She looked straight ahead, her hands wrapped tightly around the steering wheel. He wondered what was going through her mind. She had been through a lot

in the past few days, and now this was happening. That was a lot for anyone.

He realized that he was grinding his teeth, and he forced himself to stop. He had a tendency to do that when he got nervous. He took a deep breath and released it. Being nervous was natural. They were going into a dangerous situation, after all. He needed to make sure that he kept his fear in check if he was going to be useful, however.

“Dinner was good,” Maggie said in a strangely calm voice.

He looked over at her. She was still looking straight ahead, but her grip had loosened on the wheel. She was clearly taking her own steps to remain relaxed and focused.

“Very good,” he agreed, trying his best to mimic her tone.

“Jenni sometimes makes ham with a sugar glaze, but I prefer the honey glaze that she used tonight.”

“I liked the potatoes. They had a unique flavor.”

“She uses cream cheese in those.”

“Ah, that would explain it.”

“I’m not so sure about the wine, though. We hadn’t had that kind before. It was a bit too sweet for my taste.”

“Maybe a nice zinfandel or rosé to pair with it next time.”

She glanced over at him. “Do you actually know anything about wine?”

He smiled slightly. “Not a thing. I’m just naming off random wine-associated words.”

The edge of her lip twitched. “I figured.”

The hint of a smile faded away, and Michael turned his head to look out the windshield once again. He could just make out the shapes of the buildings in the distance. There was still a bit of light in the sky, but it was fading fast.

Maggie guided the car into town and parked behind her father’s bar. She turned off the engine and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, and then another. Her eyes opened and she nodded to herself.

“All right,” she said, her voice steady and determined. “Here we go.”

Michael got out of the car and followed Maggie around to the trunk. She unlocked and opened it. She dug around inside for a few moments before producing two body vests. She handed one to him and started to put on hers.

“You’re lucky that two of these were requisitioned even though Lamplight Woods only has one cop,” she said as he strapped on his vest.

“No kidding,” he agreed. “What’s the plan?”

“The shooting took place outside of Grayson’s General Store. A few of the bystanders managed to get the victim into Doc Hargrove’s office. Another lucky break. Usually he’s left for the day by now.”

“And the shooter?”

Her face hardened. “That’s the problem. Nobody got a good look at who it was or where he went. All we’ve got to go on is that he’s a male with an average build and height.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. We have to assume that he’s still in the area and armed. That’s why I parked back here. I don’t want to drive in and spook the guy into shooting again.” She paused. “We’ll go over to my office first. I’ve got another gun locked up in there.”

“No need,” Michael said. “I’m awful with firearms. I’ve gone to a firing range in San Diego a few times,

and I barely ever manage to come close to hitting the target. It's better if I don't have a gun."

"We're talking about a guy that just shot someone. You need to be able to defend yourself. You're really *that* bad?"

"I'm not exaggerating. I'm terrible. Plus... I've never been comfortable around them."

Maggie regarded him for a long moment. "Okay. Just be as careful as possible out there."

They walked around the side of the building, Maggie taking the lead. There was a small crowd gathered a few doors down. It was hard to see faces in the dim light, but he was pretty sure that he saw the mayor in the center of the group as they approached. He was proven right as they drew closer.

"Sheriff Grant," Dilfer said by way of greeting. "Mr. Dyer."

"Mayor Dilfer," Maggie replied with a nod of her head. "Is there any update from when you called?"

"No, nothing yet. The man with the gun hasn't put in another appearance."

"Good. Hopefully that means that the shooting was an isolated incident." She looked around at the gathered people. "Until we know for sure, though, I need you folks to get indoors. Go on over to the Split Log, tell my dad that this round is on me."

Most of the people did as she had asked, but the mayor didn't move a muscle.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to bring Mr. Dyer with you?” Dilfer asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I deputized him,” Maggie replied. “Don’t worry, the town is covered legally if something happens to him.”

“That isn’t how that works.”

“I don’t really care how it does or doesn’t work right now. I need help covering ground quickly, and unless you’re volunteering to go looking in the shadows for a guy with a gun that has already proven his willingness to use it, he stays.”

The mayor considered her for a moment. Michael resisted the urge to look away. There was a battle of wills going on that he didn’t fully understand, but it seemed like it was an old battle that was being renewed and he didn’t want to make it any worse.

“All right,” Dilfer said finally, turning to head towards the Split Log. “Good luck to the both of you.”

“I hate that woman,” Maggie muttered as the mayor disappeared inside the building.

“There’s a story there,” he surmised.

“More than one. I’ll tell you later. Right now we need to concentrate on what we’re doing. The shot came from the direction we’re facing. Let’s do a quick search of the main street area before we start going over every inch. The shooting happened on this side of the street so I’ll take it. You cross over to the other side. Don’t move out of sight, and if you see something wave for me to come over and don’t do anything until I get there.”

Michael quickly crossed the street and gave her a thumbs up when he was ready. They started to slowly advance down the sidewalks, glancing over at each other every few seconds. The streetlights had come on, and the glow bathed everything it touched in a soft yellowish orange. They made it easier to see where he was going, but they also made it more difficult to see anything in the dark places just outside of their reach.

He hadn't noticed it before, but it was oddly quiet. The wind wasn't blowing, and there were no sounds of cars or people. His own footsteps were jarringly loud as he walked down the sidewalk. It was a strange reversal from the howling storm earlier in the day.

He passed by the doorway to an accountant's office and paused. The angle of the doorway made it so that the lights didn't illuminate it. He thought that he saw something moving in the shadows. He took a step closer and considered signaling for Maggie. He had just started to raise his hand when he realized that all that he had seen was the Closed sign swaying gently back and forth on the other side of the door.

After a moment's hesitation, he reached out and tried to open the door. It was locked. The sign's movement must have been caused by a fan or air conditioner inside of the office.

Michael felt an arm wrap around his neck from behind, and before he could even process what was happening he felt himself being flung down to the ground. He landed hard on his back, and while the armored vest absorbed much of the impact, the air

was forced out of his lungs. The back of his head hit the concrete, and light exploded in front of his eyes.

His vision cleared quickly, and he found himself looking up at the barrel of a large gun. The person holding the weapon was saying something, but everything sounded like it was underwater. He wheezed and gasped as he tried to remain as still as possible.

There was shouting coming from his right, but it seemed far away. He wanted to shake his head to try to clear it, but the gun remained inches from his face and he didn't know how the action would be taken by his attacker. He wondered if he had a concussion. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember the symptoms of one.

The gun moved closer and pressed up against his forehead. The metal was cold. He squeezed his eyes closed for a few seconds before opening them again. His mind cleared a bit, and he heard the shouting again. He didn't dare look towards it.

There was another yell, and this time he recognized the voice as Maggie's. She was screaming at his attacker to put down the gun. It didn't seem to be working.

With an odd whooshing noise his ears started working properly again. Maggie and the attacker were going back and forth. She had lowered her voice and was trying to speak calmly and clearly, but effort wasn't being returned.

"Sir, I'm asking you to put down the gun," she was saying. "Put it down and I promise that we can talk this through."

“I don’t want to do this!” the man shouted back. “Don’t you get that I *have* to?!”

Michael felt the gun press harder against his face.

“Explain that to me,” Maggie said quickly. “Walk me through it so that I can understand it. Why do you have to do this to Mr. Dyer?”

“Dyer?” the man replied, his voice suddenly confused. “What are you talking about? This isn’t Gerald Dyer. Just look at him.”

“He’s Gerald’s son. Michael.”

“No.” There was a short pause. “No, that’s not right. It’s Skinrot. I have to kill Skinrot before he kills me!”

Maggie stared at the man holding the gun, her own pistol gripped firmly in both hands and pointed at him. He had started to ramble, and thanks to the light from the nearest streetlamp she could see that he was practically foaming at the mouth. It would be a miracle if she was able to somehow deescalate the situation.

“I don’t understand,” she said finally, trying to buy time to figure things out. “Why do you think this is Skinrot? Isn’t Skinrot supposed to live out in Lamplight Woods Cemetery?”

The man seemed surprised. He squinted and looked at her for a long moment. She noticed that the hand holding the gun didn’t waver, however.

“You know about Skinrot?” he asked suspiciously.

“Of course I do,” she answered, taking a cautious step forward. “Everyone around here knows the legend. He’s supposed to wander around Lamplight Woods Cemetery at night, eating anyone that’s trespassing.”

“He’s not there anymore! He left the cemetery and he’s been after me for... I don’t even know how long it’s been. Now, though, now I’m going to end this.”

He turned his head back towards Michael and squared his shoulders.

“No!” Maggie yelled. “Stop! Stop for just two damn seconds and listen! Look at him. Look really close at him.”

The man didn’t do as she asked, but he didn’t fire the gun, either. He had been less than a second from killing Michael, and she didn’t think that she could stop him if he tried again. She racked her brain trying to remember everything that she could about the old story.

“Skinrot is supposed to have decaying skin, right?” she said. “What’s left of it is supposed to hang off his bones. That’s how he got his name.”

“Not right after he’s eaten,” the man corrected her. “When he eats someone, that person’s skin grows on him and doesn’t start to rot away again until he’s hungry.”

She cursed herself for not remembering that part. “Okay, that’s true, but Skinrot is also supposed to smell like death and decay. Does the person you’re pointing that gun at have that kind of smell?”

The man shifted slightly. It was a very small movement, one that she almost missed, but it was enough to give her hope. It meant that he wasn’t completely sure about what he was doing. There was still a chance to talk him out of it.

“Well, no, he doesn’t,” the man conceded.

“What else, what else...” Maggie muttered to herself. “Oh! Skinrot never talks, right? He just moans and grunts like an animal.”

“Well, yeah, but what does that-”

“If that man you’ve got pinned down talks to you, he can’t possibly be Skinrot. If he speaks, will you at least consider that you’re threatening an innocent person and not some monster?”

There was a long silence. She could tell that she had gotten to the man. He was at least mulling over what she had said. He had been acting so erratic that she hadn’t been sure that she was getting through to him. Despite the circumstances she felt a pang of sympathy for him. He was obviously scared out of his mind.

“Okay,” the man said. “If he talks, it means that he can’t be Skinrot. I’ll let him up if he talks.”

“You’re making the right decision,” Maggie assured him. “Okay, Michael, go ahead. Say something.”

Nothing happened.

“Seriously, Michael, you need to start talking,” she prompted, taking her eyes off the man to look down at him. “It doesn’t matter what you say. Just say *something*.”

An odd sound came out of Michael, a combination of a moan and cough. It was repeated again a few seconds later. She felt a cold chill run down her spine. The fall must have hurt him, and he was having trouble speaking.

“See?” the man said triumphantly. “He can’t speak. This *is* Skinrot. I can finally put an end to this nightmare.”

“No, wait!” Maggie urged him. “He got hurt when you threw him down onto the sidewalk. Just give me a few minutes.”

The man shook his head emphatically. “I can’t do that. I can’t give him the chance to come after me and my family again.”

She no longer had a choice. She was going to have to kill him before he could kill Michael. Her finger wrapped around the trigger. Hopefully his hand wouldn’t clench when he went down. If it did...

“Please,” a hoarse voice wheezed.

The man looked like he had been slapped in the face. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened. He pulled the barrel of the gun away but kept it pointed at Michael.

“I have... a daughter...” Michael forced out.

Maggie immediately caught on to what he was doing. He had been a consultant for the police for years, and he must have picked up a few tricks. He was trying to establish a basic relationship with his captor, to make himself be seen as a human being instead of just a target. It was a classic hostage negotiator strategy.

Whether it was Michael’s tactic or simply hearing him speak, the man was rattled by his words. He took a step back and dropped the gun. It clanged as it struck the cement. Maggie’s heart skipped a beat as she hurried forward. They were extremely lucky that the weapon hadn’t gone off when it hit the ground.

She kicked the gun off to the side and tackled the man to the ground. He didn't resist as she flipped him onto his stomach and cuffed him. He just stared off into space with a terrified look on his face.

Michael managed to push himself up into a sitting position. His eyes weren't completely focused, and his chest was heaving with effort, but otherwise he looked like he was okay. He moved off to one side slightly and Maggie winced. There was blood on the sidewalk where his head had been.

"Michael?" she asked as she stood her prisoner up. "Are you all right?"

"I'll have to get back to you on that," he replied, blinking rapidly.

"I need you to stay still. Don't move. I'm going to take this guy down the block and throw him into a holding cell, then I'm going to come right back for you. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Michael, listen to me. Are you actually understanding what I'm saying?"

He nodded slightly, immediately sucking in a breath like he regretted doing so. "I understand. Go on, I'll be fine."

Giving him one last concerned look, Maggie turned her attention to the matter at hand. The man she had arrested didn't object or even attempt to struggle as she started walking him down the sidewalk. She wondered if he was in shock. He just stared off into the distance and blindly obeyed her

commands. She would have to send the doctor over to examine him after he was locked up.

When they reached the government building, she walked the man around the side of the structure to a door. She quickly unlocked it. There was a flight of stairs just inside. She flicked the lights on before leading him down.

This entrance led directly to the small jail that was kept under the building. It only consisted of three cells and a small desk for a guard, but that was more than enough for Lamplight Woods' needs. She had never had more than a couple of people held in the cells at a time. Those had all been teenagers that had committed some minor offense and had parents that had wanted to teach them a lesson, or the occasional drunk needing a place to sleep off a night at the bar.

"I could have killed that guy," the man said after he was inside his cell and the handcuffs had been removed.

"Yes," Maggie agreed. "You could have. What's your name, sir?"

He ignored the question. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I thought he was Skinrot. That... *thing* was out there earlier. I shot it, but I must not have killed it."

She hesitated. "Sir, that wasn't Skinrot that you shot earlier. That was Dale Carter. He works over at Best Repair, the repair shop over on the corner of Yancy and Elm. He had just closed up shop and was headed home when you shot him."

“Dale Carter? I shot... Dale?”

The man sank to the floor, weeping into his hands.

Michael waited patiently with his eyes closed, trying unsuccessfully to clear the fog that filled his head. He had regained enough of his senses to understand that he likely had a concussion. Sounds were oddly muted, and his peripheral vision was blurry. Whenever he tried to stand up his head would swim and he was forced to sit back down again before he threw up.

He gingerly reached up with one hand and touched the back of his head. There was a spot next to his right ear that felt wet and sticky. He pulled his hand away and examined his fingers. There was blood on them. He doubted that he had cracked his skull. All in all he had gotten lucky.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the sky. It hadn't been luck. If Maggie hadn't been there and done everything exactly like she had, he would have been killed. There was no question in his mind about that. The gun barrel had been pressed up against his head, and the person holding it had been willing to pull the trigger. At one point he had even felt the trigger being pulled back through the metal. Without Maggie it would have been the end right then and there.

For over a decade and a half he had managed to live a life filled with safety and comforting routine. Less than a week back in Lamplight Woods and he had already lost count of how many times he had almost died. So much for small town life being safer than life in the big city.

He wondered how long it had been since Maggie had left. He was pretty sure that it had only been a few minutes, but the passage of time was a little fuzzy just like everything else. His hand was already reaching towards his pocket to pull out his phone to check the time when he remembered that he didn't know what time she had left him. Knowing the current time wouldn't do him any good.

This wasn't the first time that he had been concussed. When he was a teenager, he had smacked his head into a large rock while learning how to ski. He smiled slightly at the memory. Evelyn had assured him that he would be perfectly fine when she had started teaching him, and an hour later she had been apologizing over and over to him as a nurse was examining him.

It had been a very mild concussion, but it had felt a lot worse than it really was at the time. He hoped that was the case this time as well.

Michael was pulled out of his internal musings when he saw a shape moving down at the end of the block. He wasn't sure at first if he had actually seen it. His vision was better than it had been initially, but it was still a bit blurry past a certain distance. That combined with the lack of light made it easy to believe that his mind was playing tricks on him.

He saw the movement again. He had definitely seen something this time, a shadow pressed up against the buildings. It was taking its time, but it was slowly heading towards him.

He suddenly felt very exposed sitting out in the open on the sidewalk. Trying to shake more of the

haze from his head, he turned to his side and attempted once again to get to his feet. The world spun as he lifted himself up, using a parked car next to him to assist. He gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to vomit.

It took a few moments, but the dizziness started to subside. He turned his head back towards where he had last seen the approaching figure. It was still there. He wasn't sure if it was watching him or something else, but it had stopped moving a dozen or so yards away.

He was able to get a better look at it now. It was still concealed in the shadows, but he could make out the general figure. It had the body shape of a man, roughly as tall as he was but broader in the shoulders.

He wondered if he was being too paranoid. This could just be a person that had seen him on the sidewalk and had come closer to get a better look, maybe to offer assistance if needed. He quickly recapped the last few minutes in his head. From an outsider's perspective there wasn't a whole lot of difference between the way he had acted and someone that had consumed way too much alcohol.

Not trusting himself to speak until the rest of the dizziness was gone, he raised his hand and waved at the figure. The man stood there silently for a moment before raising his own hand and returning the gesture. He sighed. He had been overreacting after all.

"You shouldn't be standing," a voice called from behind him.

He turned towards the speaker and saw Maggie jogging towards him. He tried to smile at her, but he

was pretty sure that it came off more like a grimace than a greeting.

“We need to get you over to Doc Hargrove’s office,” she said as she came up next to him. “Come on, put your arm over my shoulder so I can help.”

Michael automatically started to protest, but even attempting to speak sent a new wave of nausea through him. He gave up and did as he was told, draping his arm over her shoulders. She seemed to support his weight without an issue. She was quite a bit stronger than she looked.

He glanced back over to where the figure had been standing, but it was gone. He hadn’t really thought that the man would stick around. The arrival of the town sheriff to an already weird scene wasn’t the sort of thing that most people would want to get caught up in.

The walk across the street and down the sidewalk to the doctor’s office only took two minutes at most, but it seemed to last an eternity. When they reached the door, Maggie pushed it open with her foot and carefully helped him through. There was no one in the waiting area. She helped him sit down in one of the chairs and went to go find the doctor.

He turned his head towards the door leading into the other section of the building. It hadn’t been that long ago when he had been shown around the attached funeral parlor. That had been, what, five days earlier? It felt like a lifetime had passed since then.

A thought occurred to him. His father would be buried by now. He had set up everything to be taken

care of without him needing to be present, and the burial had been scheduled to take place the day before. As he sat alone in the empty waiting room he tried to decide how he felt about that.

Maggie came back into the room and sat down next to him. She sighed heavily as she stretched out in the plastic chair.

“Doc Hargrove is still working on the shooting victim,” she said, reaching up to adjust her ponytail. “Apparently the guy is going to be okay. The bullet went through the shoulder, so there’s some damage there, but it missed everything important.

“That’s good news,” Michael said, pleased to find out that he was now able to speak without wanting to throw up.

“It sure as hell is. From what Doc told me it looked like it was going to be a hell of a lot worse when it first happened. How are you holding up?”

“I’ve been better. Been worse, too, so there’s that. I think I scared the crap out of that guy out there, though.”

She frowned. “What guy?”

“There was some guy over where you left me. He was just kind of watching me, but I think you scared him off.”

“That’s weird. I didn’t see anyone. Will you be okay while I go check it out?”

“Yeah, but I really don’t think it was anything to be worried about. Just some random person.”

“Probably. We’ll see.”

Maggie left the office. Michael thought about getting up to watch her through the window, but he quickly rejected the idea. While he was definitely starting to feel more like himself, he still didn’t fancy the idea of getting up when he didn’t have to. He instead leaned back and relaxed as best as he could.

She was gone longer than he had thought she would be. He was just about to force himself to get up to make sure everything was all right when she returned to the waiting room. She was holding something in her hand.

“Take a look at this,” she instructed him, holding out her hand.

He reached over and took the object he was being offered. It was a small plastic bag, the kind that he sometimes used for storing sandwiches. Inside was a black and gray... something. It looked like a warped piece of trash.

“Open it,” she prompted. “Don’t touch it. Just open it.”

He did as he was told. He immediately held it away from him as a horrible stench poured out of it. It was vile, and he nearly gagged.

“I found that less than fifty feet from where you were,” she told him. “You’re the expert, but that smells a lot like rotting flesh to me.”

Michael was feeling quite a bit better when they left the doctor's office. Dr. Hargrove had run a number of tests on him to figure out the severity of the concussion, and it had been determined that it was a minor one. He would need to go back in for a follow-up in a few days, but until then there wasn't anything needed for it other than rest. The cut on the back of his head had only required two stitches. He had gotten off rather easy, all things considered.

"So what now?" he asked as they walked down the sidewalk. "Are you wanting to start with the shooter, or maybe question the witness first?"

"I'm planning on starting somewhere else first," Maggie replied, putting a hand on his arm. "The very first thing on my agenda is to get you home."

"You don't want me there when you question the shooter? Even after you found that, um, *souvenir* across the street?"

"Actually, it would be great to have you there. Fantastic, even. The weird stuff is definitely more your department than mine. The only hitch is that you just *suffered a concussion after being assaulted by a man with a gun.*"

She emphasized the words in such a way that it felt like each one was a nail being driven into a board.

"I'm okay, Maggie," he assured her. "I can help."

“You can help by getting some rest,” she said firmly. “Here’s the long and short of it: I’m not going to change my mind. Just accept that you’re going home and make it easier on both of us.”

He sighed. “Yeah, okay, you’re right. Just drop me off at your place so that I can get my car.”

“You heard Doc Hargrove. No driving. I’ll drop your car off tomorrow.”

They went back to Maggie’s car and got in. Despite his protests, Michael had to admit that he was feeling extremely tired. He hadn’t gotten much sleep since all of this had begun, and his body wasn’t happy about that. The days of staying up all night and into the next day with no consequences were long gone.

Maggie started the car and regarded him for a moment. She surprised him by reaching out and taking his hand. She gave him a smile.

“Hey, do me a favor and don’t think that I’m trying to keep you out of the loop,” she said. “I’m benching you tonight because I care, okay? I know we haven’t known each other very long, but I consider you a friend.”

“Same here,” Michael said, returning the smile. “I get it, and I appreciate it.”

“Good.” She let go of his hand, looking slightly embarrassed. “Let’s get you home.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the window as she drove. He didn’t like the feeling of not being needed, even if he intellectually knew that wasn’t what was happening. He would have

preferred to think that he felt that way because he wanted to help, but he was pretty sure it was actually an ego thing.

“That’s two local legends,” he said as they pulled in at Forgotten Tales.

“Pardon?” Maggie asked, getting out of the car to come around and help him out of his seat.

He nodded in gratitude as he stood up straight in the driveway. “Two local legends. Mister Skitter and Skinrot. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“You think they’re connected with the children that have been taken?”

He paused. “I think they *are* the children.”

She blinked. “Come again?”

“My... source says that the kids are becoming human/demon hybrids, right? Well, for that to happen there has to be someone bringing them into this world in the first place. If you want to control something as strong as a demon you need to have power over it, and forcing it into a form that you know and recognize is one way of doing that.”

Maggie held up a hand. “Okay, let’s just assume that made sense and move on. If you’re right, the forms that have been selected would imply that someone here in town is behind all of this.”

He nodded slightly. “Someone that’s lived here for a long time, too. Mister Skitter was always a popular story when I was growing up, but Skinrot? That one’s pretty obscure.”

“I’ll swing by in the morning so we can discuss things further. Just worry about yourself tonight.” She paused. “Were you expecting company?”

Michael turned his attention away from her and towards the car parked further up the driveway.

“No,” he said slowly. “I wasn’t.”

The front door of the house opened. Sarah stepped out onto the porch, soon followed by a boy about her age. He had the expression of someone that wanted to be anywhere else than where he was. Michael felt himself growing angry. Obviously his daughter had lied to him about not feeling well earlier that evening, and just as obviously this boy was the reason why she had told that lie.

Maggie must have seen the look on his face. She put her hand on his arm and raised an eyebrow. He forced the anger down. Sarah should at least be allowed to explain herself. Once she did, he could start looking for a nunnery to send her off to.

“I have to get back,” Maggie said quietly. “Is everything going to be okay here?”

“It’ll be fine,” he assured her.

“All right.” She didn’t seem convinced. “Just go easy on her, okay? I remember the first time my dad caught me with a guy. He blew a gasket. And that’s Josh Taylor. He’s a good kid.”

“I’ll remain cool and calm. Don’t worry about me. I’m a glacier.” He paused. “Wait, *first* time? You’re telling me this could keep happening?”

Maggie got back into the car, pointing at her ear and shaking her head as if she couldn't hear him. She clearly could.

"You're no help," he muttered under his breath as she pulled out of the driveway. "I should have just let the damn zombie eat me."

He turned back to the matter at hand. Sarah had stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, her hand still on the railing. She obviously knew that she was in trouble, but there was something else in the way that she was looking at him that made the remainder of the anger fade away. She looked troubled.

"Dad," she said to him, "this is Josh. We have something that we need to talk to you about."

The boy shifted slightly and gave a small wave.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Dyer," he said nervously.

Michael looked back and forth between the two of them. He could yell all that he wanted to later.

"Good to meet you, too, Josh," he said with a forced smile. "Come on, let's go inside and talk."

Michael was silent as he mulled over the story that Sarah and Josh had just finished telling him. They were sitting in the basement, the two of them on the couch and him in the chair. Mira was sitting back on its haunches between the two teenagers.

He watched them closely as he ran back through all the details in his head. When they had described the little girl they encountered at Ambrose Lake, he had retrieved the case file Maggie had left with him days earlier and shown them pictures of the missing children. They had confirmed that the girl they had seen was one of them, a six-year-old named Blake Paulson.

Things were starting to come together in his head. Josh had mentioned the old story about the Well Witch, and that fit in with his own hypothesis about the demons that had been brought into Lamplight Woods. Between Mister Skitter, Skinrot, and the Well Witch, that meant that all three missing children were accounted for. There was a lot more to the puzzle, but at least some of the pieces were falling into place.

In the meantime, though, he had two teenagers to deal with. He was conflicted about what to do. Sarah had lied to him and, worse, told an outsider about a number of things that he wasn't happy about having revealed. On the other hand, she had been responsible enough to come to him and tell him what had happened even though she knew that she would get into trouble.

He stood up and walked around the small table that separated the chair and couch. He took Sarah's hand and pulled her up to her feet. She looked both surprised and confused.

Before she could say anything, he wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. The part of her story that kept playing over and over again in his mind was that he had almost lost her multiple times during her escape from the lake. The thought of that was terrifying, and everything else was unimportant compared to that.

After a moment she returned the hug and started to cry into his shoulder. He felt the stress in her body loosen as she did so. She was a tough kid, but what she had gone through had been horrible. She couldn't just keep it balled up inside of her. When her sobs started to subside, he kissed her on the top of the head and pulled back slightly.

"So I'm guessing that I'm not going to be getting my old bike back?" he said with mock seriousness.

She laughed and pushed away from him, playfully punching him in the arm. She wiped away the tears and sniffed loudly. She seemed embarrassed by the show of emotion.

"I promise that I'm not usually like this," she said to Josh.

"It's okay," the boy assured her. "You lasted longer than I did. I was a mess when I got home."

"Now then," Michael interjected firmly. "This is the part where you both need to make me a promise."

They stopped talking and waited for him to continue.

“You seem like a good guy, Josh,” he continued. “I probably don’t need to say this, but I’m going to anyway. Sarah has told you some things about both our family and Lamplight Woods as a whole that need to stay quiet. You can’t tell *anyone* about any of it.”

“Oh, of course, Mr. Dyer,” Josh said quickly. “I hadn’t planned on it.”

“Good, thank you. Sarah, I need you to look me in the eyes and promise me that this is the last time that you reveal family secrets without talking to me first about it. Like I said, Josh seems fine, but you told him some things tonight that weren’t your things to share.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but she seemed to think better of it. He could tell that what he had said had resonated with her. She nodded in agreement.

An hour later, after they had all talked about less serious subjects for a while, Josh headed back home. Sarah walked him out to his car and spoke privately with him for a few minutes. Michael resisted the urge to watch them from the window.

She came back through the front door and turned around to wave goodbye to her friend. She closed the door behind her and faced her father with a slightly worried look on her face.

“Dad, I really am sorry that I didn’t tell you about what happened earlier,” she said. “I just... I wasn’t ready to talk about it. Or even to process what had

happened. I thought having Josh here would help me explain things.”

“You eventually did tell me,” Michael pointed out. “That counts for something.”

“So what now?”

He thought about the question for a moment. “I’m not really sure. I do think that you should stay at Forgotten Tales for the foreseeable future.”

She stood up straight. “You’re grounding me?”

He shook his head. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that it’s clearly not safe out there right now. If you stay here until we know it is…”

“Come on, Dad. When is it *ever* going to be absolutely safe?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do, and I get that you’re trying to protect me, but come on. Putting me under house arrest isn’t the way to do it.”

He shook his head in frustration. “It’s not house arrest. Are you forgetting that you were attacked this afternoon?”

Her face started to turn red. “No, I absolutely have not. I’m also not forgetting that we weren’t attacked until there was no one else around, and even when everything went down, we did a pretty damn good job of handling ourselves.”

“And if you don’t the next time?” he said quickly. “What if the next time you don’t manage to get lucky

like you did a thousand different times today? What then?"

They stared at each other for a few tense minutes. He didn't think that he was being unreasonable in the slightest. He was keeping her safe, which was his job as a parent.

"Is there a compromise here?" Sarah asked finally, visibly forcing herself to calm down.

"What kind of compromise?" he responded suspiciously.

For as long as she had been alive, Sarah had been a negotiator. When she was four they had a long conversation about her bedtime and how she believed that adding an additional hour to the time she was awake was a good idea. A few years later, she had offered a very well thought out argument for why she shouldn't have to go to school even though she wasn't sick because other kids might be and could thus pass germs onto her. His personal favorite had been on her thirteenth birthday; she had actually presented scientific studies about how the removal of her curfew would be good for her development.

"What if I promise to only leave the property if you or Josh are with me?" Sarah asked. "At least until... whatever this is has passed. That way I'm never alone. That should be safe."

"Not good enough," Michael said flatly.

Her eyes narrowed. "Fine. What if I also promise to only go out during the day."

"Keep going."

She closed her eyes and shook her head in frustration. “How about I *a/so* promise to only go over to Josh’s house and to places where there are a lot of people around.”

Despite knowing that she was attempting to manipulate him, he considered her proposal. Sarah chafed under too many rules and restrictions. The more that got put on her, the more likely she was to purposely disobey them. Her suggestions were all reasonable, and she had been right about one thing. There was no way to make sure that she was perfectly safe all the time.

“Okay,” he relented. “As long as you’re willing to work within those limitations, I guess that I’m fine with it.”

“Thank you, Dad,” Sarah said with a sigh of relief.

“Yeah, well, don’t make me regret it. Why don’t you head up to bed? We could both use some rest.”

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

She walked past him and towards the stairs. He shook his head slowly. She had worn him down, and it hadn’t even taken very long. She was definitely her mother’s daughter.

He turned away from the stairs. While he was feeling tired, he had something else that he needed to do first. There was still the matter of making sure that Mister Skitter wouldn’t be coming after Maggie. He unlocked the hidden study and shut himself inside.

Michael didn't get much sleep that night. He knew that he needed to, but the work was important. He spent the majority of the time in the study referencing texts and making notes on a blackboard. Every so often he would doze off in one of the chairs, but it was never for more than a few minutes at a time.

It was almost seven when his phone rang. He looked at the screen and saw that it was Maggie. He wasn't the only one that hadn't gotten much sleep.

"Good morning," he answered.

"I'm surprised that you're already awake," Maggie replied, her voice sounding exhausted.

"I think it's more accurate to say that I'm *still* awake."

"You were supposed to get some rest."

"I know, but I was working on something. Listen, I have good news. From what I've been reading, the demon—"

"Yeah, I know, it can be hard to sleep when you're all wound up."

Confused, Michael stopped talking.

"It's good to know that you're feeling better," Maggie continued. "So, hey, I'm here with Mayor Dilfer in her office. She's asking if there's anything

that we need to wrap up this case as soon as possible.”

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly, catching on as to why she had interrupted him. “Maybe you and I can sit down and come up with a list.”

“Good idea. I’ll pass that along. Jenni made some breakfast for you and Sarah. Would we be able to drop that and your car off at your place? Say, in an hour or so?”

“That would be fine.”

Maggie hung up, and Michael was left staring at the screen of his phone. He wasn’t fully sure of what had been going on with that conversation, but the final part had been clear enough. She was going to come by in an hour so that they could speak freely.

He got out of his chair and stretched. His body was very stiff, and it took a few minutes to work out the kinks. Just another friendly reminder that he was getting older.

By the time that he got into the shower and got dressed, Sarah had woken up. He was both glad and jealous that she looked like she wasn’t suffering any physical effects from the previous day. He didn’t want his daughter to suffer, of course, but it hardly seemed fair that she had gone through a more strenuous ordeal than he had and yet he was the one worse for the wear.

“Father,” she said as she filled a bowl with cereal.

“Daughter,” he replied. “Sleep well?”

“Better than you, apparently. You look like you got run over by a truck.”

“Truth be told, it feels like the truck went over me then backed up for another pass. Sheriff Grant is going to be here in a few minutes.”

“No problem. I’m just going to eat breakfast and get ready to leave.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought that maybe you would want to hang out here today after everything that happened yesterday. Get some rest, recharge, that sort of thing.”

“Nah, Josh is going to pick me up and we’re going to hang out at his house.” She smiled at him. “Don’t worry, Dad, I plan on following our agreement to the letter.”

“Yeah, well, I have to be honest, I’m not sure if I’m more worried about you being attacked by a monster or you going over to a hormonally-crazed teenage boy’s house.”

Sarah’s face contorted. “Eww, Dad. Nothing like *that* is going to happen. It’s not like that.”

“I’m just saying, if you come home pregnant...”

“*Jesus Christ!*” she said angrily, putting her bowl in the sink and storming upstairs.

Michael managed to make it a few seconds before the grin spread across his face. He knew it had been mean, but he couldn’t help himself.

There was a knock on the front door. He went out into the shop and glanced out the window. Maggie

was standing on the porch, still wearing the same uniform that she had been the previous evening. There were large bags under her eyes. He quickly let her in, noticing that his car was back in the driveway as he did so.

“What a fucking night,” she said by way of greeting, running a hand over her face.

“That seems to be the general consensus,” Michael commented. “You want something to drink?”

“Yeah, a stiff shot of whiskey, and leave the bottle.”

“I can offer you a can of Coke in a mostly clean glass.”

“That will have to do.”

They went into the kitchen and he retrieved the can from the refrigerator. Maggie waved off the glass and proceeded to drink the entirety of the can’s contents in one long guzzle. She set it down on the counter and nodded gratefully.

“Sorry about that weird call earlier,” she said. “I couldn’t say much in front of Dilfer.”

“So what’s going on?” he asked.

“We’re on our own, that’s what’s going on.” She shook her head in frustration. “I told Dilfer that we need help. There are demons running around out there, we had a shooting right in the middle of downtown, and Grace Claredon was murdered yesterday. Things are spiraling out of control. We need help from the state, or maybe even the feds. Do you know what she said?”

“Lamplight Woods handles Lamplight Woods business.”

Maggie looked at him closely. She seemed thrown by what he had said. Her eyes narrowed.

“How do you know that's what she said?” Maggie asked, the tone of her voice cold and unfriendly.

“Because that's been the response to every request for outside help with paranormal activity since before I was born,” Michael explained. “Both my father and my grandfather were adamant about it, as well as every authority figure in Lamplight Woods that I've ever known.”

“Why? Explain to me why we can't get any *fucking help* when we need it this badly?”

“I'm not saying that I agree with it,” he said quickly. “There were decisions made a long time ago that people still insist on sticking to now. There's nothing that we can do about it. If we try to contact someone and explain what's going on, we'll be dismissed as lunatics. Without the support and weight of the mayor's office we can't get anywhere with outside requests.”

Maggie swore loudly. “This is insane, Michael.”

“Again, I'm not disagreeing with you. It is. There isn't time to figure out a way around it, though. We're just going to have to work out how to deal with things ourselves. What was that part of the call where you asked if we needed anything about?”

She regained control of her temper with visible effort. “Even though she rejected my request to call in

outside authorities, she did say that she would try to get us anything that we might need. As long as it won't raise any suspicions, anyway. She made me call you right then and there. It was probably her way of sending a message."

Michael nodded. "Makes sense. She wants to keep things in-house, so she's willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that happens."

"This is so stupid."

"I know."

They were silent for a moment. Maggie absently played with the empty can with her fingers as she leaned against the counter. He wondered if all the town sheriffs that had come before her had needed to deal with the same feelings of frustration and helplessness the first time they had encountered such a strange case.

"You said on the phone that you have good news," Maggie said. "I could use some of that right now."

"Yeah, right," he replied, rousing himself from his thoughts. "I did some research, and I've figured out a way to make sure that Mister Skitter can't track you once he's recovered."

"That's a relief. What do we need to do?"

He led her back out into the shop and went over to the bookcase. While Maggie knew in general terms what his family had been involved with over the years, there was a lot that she didn't know that she deserved to. He opened the latch and slowly pushed the

bookcase away from the wall. It was time to change that.

“Whoa, wait, what the hell?” she asked, her eyes moving between the exposed door and the front of the shop.

“You showed me some of your world when you had me over for dinner and introduced me to Jenni,” Michael said, opening the door and stepping off to one side. “Let me show you some of mine.”

Michael spent the next twenty minutes explaining both the existence of the hidden study as well as the events that had led up to its creation. Maggie simply sat in one of the chairs and listened silently, not asking a single question as he spoke. When he finally finished he waited for a response, but the one that she gave wasn't what he had been expecting.

"Okay," she said with a nod.

"That's it?" Michael asked in surprise. "You're fine with everything that I just told you?"

"A room that shouldn't exist being created because of an evil device that also shouldn't exist isn't even the weirdest thing I've seen in the last twenty-four hours. I've decided to just accept it and move on."

He had no reply for that.

"So about this thing you found that will keep the big bad demon away from me. What is it?"

"It's...actually pretty simple," he said, shaking himself out of his stupor. "You just need to drink a mixture of water and half a dozen specific herbs to cleanse your body. Nothing dangerous, and I've got everything we need here. It won't taste good, but it will do the job."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

“Thank God, finally something easy.” She leaned back in her chair. “I’ve got some news, too. I’ve got a major lead in the case.”

Michael blinked. “Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised about it.”

“I don’t mean it like that. I just would have thought the shooter would have kept you busy all night.”

“He was actually what got the ball rolling.” She took a moment to collect her thoughts. “The shooter’s name is Carl Billingsly. He’s a contractor that’s been working with the crews that have been expanding the downtown area over the past few years. Managing them, really. There’s another guy that is supposedly overseeing things, but Billingsly is the one that handles the crews on-site. Nothing gets done without his go-ahead. He moved to town two years ago so he didn’t have to keep commuting to work when he realized that this was going to be a continuing project.”

“All right.”

“That got me thinking about Mrs. Claredon saying that she was sorry about selling some land. I went ahead and let myself into the town property records to do some digging. About a decade ago, she sold off nearly 150 acres of land that her family owned on the west side of Lamplight Woods.”

“The west side?” Michael frowned. “That’s just empty fields and woods, isn’t it? The only thing I can think of over that way is the old Ambrose Logging Company.”

Maggie smiled slightly. “That’s what it *used* to be. Now it’s home to Synthetic Material Research’s facility.”

“I didn’t know that. Is it important?”

“Maybe not by itself, but you’re missing a key piece. I finally figured out what the connection is between the children. There are four that have been targeted so far. Two of them are kids of SMR employees, and the other two have parents that work at the Nagy Clinic on the outskirts of town. All of their families moved to Lamplight Woods less than ten years ago.”

“Wait, so…”

“Yep.” Maggie’s smile became broader. “Everyone that has been targeted is a new resident of Lamplight Woods. I think that someone that’s lived here all their life doesn’t like the changes that have been going on, and they’re using those demons in the form of old local legends to make their point.”

“I’m impressed,” Michael told her. “Really, I am. That’s some incredible detective work, Maggie.”

“Thank you, thank you. Please, no applause needed.”

He scratched his chin. “That explains what happened with Sarah.”

Maggie sat up straight. “What? What happened to Sarah?”

He raised a hand. “She’s okay. She and her friend Josh found the missing girl yesterday. Blake Paulson. They were out at Ambrose Lake.”

“Holy shit. Why didn’t you tell me? Did they take her back to her parents?”

“No.” Michael shook his head slowly. “Unfortunately, she’s been fully possessed. They barely managed to make it out alive.”

“*Fuck.*” Maggie closed her eyes. “You said that they’re okay, though. That’s good.”

“They seem to be. I think Sarah’s more shaken up about it than she’s letting on, but neither of them is hurt. When they were telling me what happened, Josh said the girl reminded him of the legend of the Well Witch.”

“The one about the witch that was drowned in a well and takes over the body of anyone that looks down into the water?”

He nodded. “That’s the one. The description fits, too. The girl had two hands coming out of her mouth, and they could see eyes looking out at them from further inside. She even refused to go out into the rain. Supposedly the witch hates water because of how she died.”

“Sarah was born here, but she only lived here for, what, a few months before you left with her?” Maggie asked thoughtfully. “If you look at it that way, she’s an outsider.”

“And from our mystery person’s point of view, it means that she’s a potential target. We need to find whoever’s behind this, and we need to do it fast.”

“Yeah, but how do we do that?”

“We start back at the beginning, with the missing children. We know *why* they were targeted, but we don’t know *how*. They had to have come across the person’s radar somehow. We work out how that happened, and we just might have our killer.”

Maggie stood up. “I’ll go get all the files that I have. I hope you enjoy paperwork. I’m very thorough.”

When Maggie returned with the documents, Michael was shocked by the sheer amount of them that there were. She had said that there was quite a bit, but even with that warning he hadn't expected there to be so much. He helped her bring in a dozen file boxes from her car and put them into the study before they started going through them.

They were looking for any and all connections between the children. It was highly unlikely that they had been chosen as demon hosts simply because their families weren't longtime citizens of Lamplight Woods. They weren't the only children that fit that description, after all. There had to be some other common denominator that they shared.

As they went through the documents, they both kept a list of names of people that had contact with the children within a few months of their disappearances. Maggie had performed very detailed interviews with the parents. More detailed than he had ever seen, in fact. He was once again impressed by her skills.

Michael had been worried from the start that their efforts were going to produce too many names. Lamplight Woods was a small town, and as was often the case with small towns, everyone knew everyone. He shook his head slightly as he flipped to a new page on his notepad. His fears were turning out to be justified.

“This is a lot of names,” Maggie said when they had finished. “There are hundreds of them between the four children. Comparing these lists is going to suck.”

“Want to know a simple trick that should never have to be explained to you, but for some reason does?” he asked with a small smile. “It made me feel *really* stupid when it was pointed out to me when I was in college.”

“Sure.”

“We type all the names onto a spreadsheet, then sort the lines in alphabetical order. It groups all the same names together, and you just look for groups of four.”

“That... is a really obvious solution in hindsight.”

“I know, right? I felt like a complete moron when it was suggested to me by a teacher. I’ll get my laptop.”

It took a few minutes to get all of the names typed into the spreadsheet. Once he had finished, he sorted the columns in alphabetical order and started writing down the names that all four children had in common. It was a surprisingly short list.

“There are only three people that I’m seeing that all the children came into contact with,” he said, giving the spreadsheet one last glance to make sure that he wasn’t missing anyone. “Terry Grayson, Carol Dilfer, and Morigan Clay.”

“Mayor Dilfer is on that list?” Maggie asked in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting that one.”

“I think we can rule her out. It wouldn’t make any sense. Why ask me to assist with the investigation if she was the cause of it? She could have just let me handle my father’s affairs and leave. I never would have known that anything was happening.”

“As much as I *want* to have a reason to remove her from her office kicking and screaming, you’re probably right. That leaves Terry Grayson and Morrigan Clay.”

Michael frowned. “Morrigan Clay. Why is that name familiar?”

“Jenni mentioned her at dinner. She runs a daycare out of her house. It makes sense that all the children would have come into contact with her. A lot of the working parents in town use her.”

“Terry Grayson owns Grayson’s General Store, so the children would have seen him when they went shopping with their parents. He’s a possibility, but his interactions with the children aren’t nearly as personal. Besides, why would he be unhappy about the town’s growth? That just means more customers and more money for him.”

Maggie shook her head slowly. “Only three people on the list. How could I have possibly missed that?”

“You couldn’t have seen it,” Michael assured her. “Until Benjamin Henderson was possessed, there were only three children. There were dozens of links between the first three. Benjamin was the key to narrowing things down to something usable.”

She shook her head again. "I still should have been able to find some connection."

Michael understood the guilt that she was going through. There had been more than one case he worked on where some key piece of the puzzle hadn't become available until after another killing or violent act had occurred. Even though realistically there hadn't been any way of him being able to put things together until that key piece was revealed, he had still felt a heavy load of guilt each and every time it had happened.

"It's hard to believe that Morrigan Clay could be the person behind this," Maggie said. "I give Jenni a hard time about her, but she doesn't seem like someone that could be capable of something like this. She's great with kids."

"It's very possible that it's not her," he replied. "This isn't exactly the most airtight case I've ever seen. We need to find out for sure."

He stood up and went over to one of the many bookcases lining the study's walls. He scanned the spines of the books until he found the one that he was looking for. It was an older tome, and he was careful to put as little pressure on the cover as possible when he removed it.

"I saw something in here the other day when I was first looking into demons," he said as he opened the book and flipped through the pages. "It might be able to help with... Here it is."

He quickly read through the passage to confirm that he remembered it correctly. He passed the book over to Maggie and sat down on the edge of the desk

while she read. She looked up at him when she had finished.

“I’ve never heard of diatomaceous earth before,” she admitted.

“It’s a type of rock that’s formed from the remains of aquatic organisms,” Michael explained. “The kind that’s sold in stores is a powder made from grinding up the rock. It’s used for a lot of different things, everything from being a food supplement to killing fleas and bedbugs.”

“It says here that it can be used to detect the use of spells and rituals.”

“Yeah. It’s not exactly a major use that’s advertised on the back of the bag, but diatomaceous earth absorbs lingering traces of that kind of power on contact. It changes color almost immediately. We can use it to see if Ms. Crane has been engaging in any summoning rituals. We’ll move down the list if we don’t find anything.”

“Does it have to come into contact with the person?”

He shook his head. “No, it just has to come into contact with traces of magic in the air.”

Maggie nodded once. “Good. I wasn’t sure how I was going to explain to Morrigan why I needed her to stick her finger into powder made from dead fish.”

“This all looks like gibberish to me,” Josh said as he looked through the pages for a third time.

Sarah had to admit that he was right. Nothing on the pages seemed to have a real meaning. The damage from the water might have destroyed some important information that could have made everything make sense, or maybe without context there wasn't a way to decipher what any of it had to do with, well, *anything*. Whatever the case, the writings were utter nonsense in their current state.

She had been true to her word. Instead of going to the Fordham Cabin to investigate the drawing in her grandfather's journal as they had originally planned, Josh had picked her up and they had gone straight over to the house he lived in with his grandmother. It was a rather small home, and his bedroom was cramped with both of them inside, but she liked it. The place felt more cozy than claustrophobic.

“Yeah, you're right,” she conceded, closing the journal. “I mean, clearly my grandfather was working on something, but there's no way to tell what it was.”

“You didn't know him very well, right?” he asked as he set the stack of papers down on the bed next to him.

“I didn't know him at all. My dad and I left Lamplight Woods a few months after I was born.”

“Is it possible that he was, well...”

“Completely crazy?” She shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe. This doesn’t *feel* like a crazy person’s work, though. Well, maybe a little crazy, but what I mean is that there’s a kind of weird rhyme and reason to it. I think we’re just missing something that will bring it all together.”

She sighed again and loaded everything into her backpack. There was no point in obsessing over it.

It was frustrating. She had been so sure that the journal was important, and she had been convinced that she would be able to work out what her grandfather had been working on. Then they had found the pages in the trailer. What were the odds of that happening? It was like she had been meant to find them.

Now, though, she was just banging her head against a wall.

“You need to keep your eyes open,” Josh said.

“Why’s that?” she asked, turning her head towards him.

“You found the journal in your grandfather’s room and the other pages in that trailer. I get the feeling that there’s going to be bits and pieces of this scattered all over the place.”

Her mood brightened a bit. “You think so?”

“I do. There’s all sorts of weird stuff going on around Lamplight Woods, and none of it has easy answers. Why would this be different, right?”

She smiled. “Right. Thanks for that.”

“Thanks for what?”

“Just... thanks.” She tilted her head slightly. “How’s your nose doing?”

He touched it gingerly. “It’s okay. I’m lucky that I didn’t break it when I fell. It’s just sore.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, can’t complain. I’m getting a little hungry. You want to go get something to eat?”

“Sure, just as long as it’s somewhere with other people around.”

He nodded. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t ask you to break your promise to your dad. I know a place.”

A few minutes later Josh was backing his small car out of the driveway. Sarah found it amusing to see him hunched over in the driver’s seat. Even with his seat lowered as far as it would go, his head still pressed up against the roof. He must have noticed her looking at him because he shot her a quick smile.

“Do you find something comical about my appearance when I am driving my automobile?” he asked in an exaggerated voice.

“That is quite the deep cut Simpsons reference,” she noted.

“Why thank you. I pride myself on being as obscure as possible. This isn’t the most comfortable car in the world to drive, but it was grandmother’s before she upgraded. She gave it to me when I got my license.”

“What is your grandmother driving now?”

“A heavy duty pickup with an extended cab and absolutely massive tires.”

She laughed. “She sounds like my kind of person. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“She’ll be home from work in a few hours, so you’ll get your chance.”

Sarah expected Josh to drive towards downtown, but instead he headed in the opposite direction. She raised an eyebrow as she watched out the window. Granted, she hadn’t been in town for very long, but she didn’t know that there were places to eat that weren’t in the main section.

About ten minutes later he turned down a small side street. The road only went on for a few blocks, but both sides were packed with parked cars. A truck was pulling out just ahead of them, and Josh parked the car in the spot that had opened up. He undid his seatbelt and got out of the car. Not wanting to be left behind, she did the same.

At the far end of the street was a food truck. It was red and white, and a striped cloth overhang jutting out over the open window. Even from this distance she could see the man working in the kitchen. He was extremely muscular, to the point that she wondered how he moved around inside without banging off the walls. Dozens of people were surrounding the truck, some already having been served and others waiting for their food.

“Welcome to Wally’s Barbeque,” Josh said as they walked towards the line. “It’s the absolute best food

here in Lamplight Woods. Wally's the giant in the truck. Three times a week he makes fresh barbeque and opens up shop for lunch."

"And this many people show up?" Sarah asked in surprise. "It looks like half the town is here."

"I don't think you understand just how good this food is. You'll know why everyone's here when you try it."

They got in line and waited for their turn. Sarah passed the time by looking around at the people that had gathered. She recognized a few of them from seeing them around town over the past week, but most of the patrons were unfamiliar to her.

After a few minutes, she noticed that someone was looking back at her. It was a woman a little younger than her father, probably closer to Sheriff Grant's age. She was wearing jeans and a light blue button-up shirt, and her feet were adorned with black shoes.

At first Sarah thought that the woman might be looking beyond her to someone behind her. When she casually turned her head to check, however, there was no one there. She turned back to find the woman still standing there and staring. It was a little unsettling.

"Hey, Josh," she said, nudging him on the elbow. "Who's that?"

"Which person?" he asked, looking in the direction that she indicated.

“There. The woman in the blue shirt. The one with the short hair.”

“Oh. The one next to the bald guy on the crutches?”

“Yeah. Her.”

“That’s Ms. Clay,” Josh told her. “She runs a daycare here in Lamplight Woods.”

Maggie was surprised to find that Grayson's General Store had diatomaceous earth in stock. She found it on the bottom shelf in the gardening section, and judging by the dust on the bag there wasn't much call for it. When she purchased the ten pound bag, the man behind the counter, Terry Grayson, commented that he had never actually sold the product to anyone before. It had been a special order for a customer that had never picked it up.

She smiled at him and thanked him for the help. While she did so, however, she carefully watched him for signs of anything out of the ordinary. He was one of the the three people that had come into contact with the missing children a short time before their various disappearances. If he was at all nervous, he didn't show it.

Driving over to Morigan Clay's house, she parked the car and opened the bag to look inside. The diatomaceous earth was light brown, and it felt like sand as she ran her fingers through it. Michael had told her that she wouldn't need much of it for it to work, so she had brought a couple of plastic sandwich bags with her. She scooped a handful of the powder into both bags and slid them into her pocket.

She wasn't sure how she was going to handle this. She had run through a few scenarios in her head, but it wasn't like this was something that had ever come up before. She was just going to have to wing it.

Maggie got out of the car and took a quick look around. It didn't seem like many, if any, of Morrigan's neighbors were home. There weren't any cars in the driveways or parked along the street. It would have been easy to imagine that the entire block had been abandoned.

As she walked up the sidewalk towards the front door, she passed a small white sign hanging from a post. The words 'Sunny Friends Daycare' were hand-painted on it in a wide variety of colors. The sign was slightly tilted to the right, as if it had been bumped into at some point and not put back into its original state.

She reached the front door and found a different sign waiting for her. Hanging on the inside of the glass was a small note stating that the daycare was closed due to illness. She knocked on the door. There was no response.

She thought about trying to open the door, but she stopped herself before her hand reached the doorknob. She couldn't just enter a residence like that. She had been skirting the edges of illegal entry when she had gone into Grace Claredon's house, but at least then she had the excuse of being worried about the elderly woman's safety.

This was quite a bit different. Morrigan Clay was a suspect in an ongoing investigation. Procedure called for a search warrant before she could enter the premises without the owner's consent.

Maggie's eyes narrowed. She was sure that she could acquire a warrant if necessary. She was friendly with the local magistrate, and if any further

push was needed she knew that Mayor Dilfer would put on some pressure.

Just because she could get it didn't mean that she should, though. At the moment the only thing that linked Morrigan to the disappearances was an association with all the missing children that could easily be explained away. That wasn't nearly enough to completely upend the woman's life.

She turned to leave. She hadn't gone more than a few feet when she noticed something across the street. In between two of the houses was a vacant lot. It was overgrown, the grass and weeds so tall that it would have come up to at least her waist. The lot backed up to the woods, where there was a small gap between the trees.

She cursed herself for not realizing where she was sooner. As a teenager, she had visited the empty lot often. The gap in the trees was a path that led to Ambrose Lake.

Morrigan could have easily seen Sarah Dyer and Josh Taylor pass through the lot and into the trees from her house.

She glanced back at the house and considered things. Coming to a decision, she went back up onto the porch and removed one of the baggies of diatomaceous earth from her pocket. She opened it and poured half the contents into her hand. Not sure how this was supposed to work, she waited.

It only took a few seconds. The light brown powder quickly turned black and compressed into a hard lump. Within moments she was holding

something that looked very much like a piece of charcoal.

There was no way this could be considered a scientific test. It wasn't something that could be used as evidence, and it certainly wouldn't hold up in any court. What it did do, however, was convince her that she had found the person she was looking for.

She went back to her car. It was almost impossible to reconcile the Morrigan Clay that she knew with someone that was hurting both children and adults. She needed to know the motive behind it. That was the piece of the puzzle that was still missing.

She waited for a few minutes to see if Morrigan would return home, but when nothing happened she started up the car. Reaching for her cellphone, she quickly dialed a number.

"Morrigan Clay is definitely our perp," she said as soon as the call was answered.

"I know," Michael said, an odd tone in his voice.

"The powder turned black and hard right when I took it out of the bag, and..." She paused. "What do you mean, you know?"

"I mean that I know that she's the one behind everything. There's no question about it anymore."

"How?"

He was silent for a moment. "If I tell you this, I need to be talking with Maggie Grant, my friend. Not Maggie Grant, Lamplight Woods sheriff."

She made a face. "I'm not going to like this, am I? Okay, fine, you're speaking with your friend. Go on."

"I called up an associate of mine that works for... Well, let's just say that he works for a certain government agency and leave it at that. I asked him to run a background check for me on Morigan Clay. Don't worry, it was completely off the record. Nothing is going to get back to the mayor or anyone else."

"I'm sure that you're aware that kind of favor isn't strictly legal."

"Talking with my friend and not the sheriff, right?"

She passed a hand over her face. "Yeah, yeah, we're just two buddies talking here. What did your associate find out?"

She heard the sound of rustling papers.

"There wasn't a whole lot about her time in Lamplight Woods," Michael said. "That's not surprising. However, there are a few incidents when she was in college at Brigham Young that got flagged. My contact managed to find some records and transcripts that... Well, they put some things into perspective about why she's doing what she's doing."

"I'll be right over," Maggie told him, hanging up the phone.

The food was every bit as good as Josh had hyped it up to be. Sarah was instantly hooked the moment that she took the first bite from the ribs she ordered. She closed her eyes and just enjoyed the smoky flavor for half a minute before opening them again and swallowing.

“Oh my God,” she said, grabbing one of the napkins they had set on the hood of his car.

“I don’t want to say that I told you so,” Josh said as he took a sip from his drink, “but I absolutely told you so.”

“This is phenomenal. You can’t get anything like this in San Diego.”

“I’m pretty sure you can’t get it anywhere else. You should try the chicken next time. It’s incredible.”

She smiled and sighed in satisfaction. The smile slipped slightly as she realized that there might not be a next time. Once her father finished up on the police case he was assisting with and figured things out with Forgotten Tales, they would be heading back to the West Coast.

She watched as Josh devoured his pulled pork sandwich. A week ago she had been complaining about coming to Lamplight Woods. Now she was feeling sad at the prospect of leaving.

It didn’t even make sense. She had bounced from horror to horror during her time here. She should

want to get as far away from it as humanly possible. If she was being honest with herself, though, she didn't want to leave. That realization both surprised and confused her.

They had been two of the last people to arrive for the lunch rush. Most of the gathered crowd had already finished eating and left. She hadn't seen one dissatisfied look as the people had passed them.

"Hello, Joshua," a woman's voice said.

Sarah had been lost in her thoughts, and she jumped slightly at the sound of the voice. She looked up to find the woman that she had noticed staring at them standing next to Josh, a polite smile on her face.

"Oh, hello, Ms. Clay," he replied, returning the smile. "How are you this afternoon?"

"I'm doing well, thank you," the woman replied. "Who's your friend?"

"My name is Sarah Dyer," Sarah said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Dyer... You wouldn't happen to be related to Gerald Dyer, would you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm his granddaughter."

"Really. How interesting. I didn't know that he had any grandchildren."

The conversation was pleasant and polite, but something was setting off warning bells in the back of Sarah's head. The woman's smile didn't reach her eyes. She seemed to be scrutinizing them.

“Well, I won’t keep the two of you,” Ms. Clay said. “I just wanted to come over and say hello.”

She started to walk away, but she turned back to them after only a few steps. The smile was gone from her face. It had been replaced by a look that Sarah couldn’t identify.

“One last thing,” the woman said. “I heard that your father is assisting Sheriff Grant with finding those missing children. Does he think that they’ll be able to?”

“He doesn’t talk about cases with me,” Sarah told her slowly. “My dad is really good at his job, though, so I’m sure they’ll find them.”

“I see. Well, good, then.”

She spun on her heel and hurried over to her car. She got in and drove away, leaving both Sarah and Josh feeling extremely confused about the conversation they had just been a part of. They turned to each other and both of them shrugged at the same time.

“Any idea what that was about?” Sarah asked as she went back to eating her ribs.

“No clue,” Josh confirmed. “I’ve known her for a long time. I used to get dropped off at her daycare whenever my grandmother had something to do. I’ve never seen her like that before. She looked, I dunno, *crazed*.”

“Maybe she’s sick?” she suggested.

“Yeah, that could be it. She was sweating and pale. Hopefully she’s not contagious.”

There was a loud rumbling noise as the truck pulling the Wally's Barbeque trailer went down the road past them. Sarah caught a brief glimpse of the large man behind the wheel. He waved at her before continuing on his way.

"Wally's one of the good ones," Josh told her. "He doesn't say much and he looks really intimidating, but he does whatever he can to make his customers happy. He does a lot of volunteer work, too."

She had just opened her mouth to respond when she saw something across the street. Standing in the shadows between two houses, her hair matted and tangled, was the little girl that they had encountered at the lake. She was staring at them with the same blank expression on her face. The nightgown she was wearing was even more filthy than it had been the previous day.

"Well Witch," Sarah whispered.

"What was that?" Josh asked, not hearing her over the noise of the last of the cars leaving.

"The fucking *Well Witch*," she practically yelled, pointing at the girl.

His eyes widened as he turned towards where she was indicating. "Oh. Oh shit."

"We need to go. Right fucking now."

They got in the car. Sarah watched the girl as Josh pulled the car out onto the road and drove away. She didn't move, but her eyes followed them until she was out of view.

"It wasn't the lake," Sarah muttered.

“What?” Josh asked as he drove, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“I thought that she was coming after us at the lake because it was secluded. I was wrong. She’s still after us, and that was a hell of a lot more public of a place.”

“Great. We have a stalker. What do we do?”

Sarah didn’t have an answer for that. She did know the one person that might, though.

“We need to go back to my house,” she said. “My dad will know what to do.”

“Are you sure about that?” Josh asked skeptically.

“No, but it’s our best and only option.”

“All right,” Maggie said as she leaned against the store counter. “Tell me what you found out about Morrigan Crane.”

Michael nodded and flipped through the stapled stack of papers he was holding. His contact at the FBI had been extremely thorough in a very short amount of time, and there was a lot to process. Most of the information was just a collection of small items that weren't meaningful, so the trick was to pick through everything and figure out what actually mattered.

“As far as I can tell, she was just a typical kid growing up here in Lamplight Woods,” he began, setting the papers down on one of the store's shelves. “There wasn't anything that really stood out. Good student, friends, various extracurricular activities. Basically your typical small town kid.”

“You're sounding like an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*,” Maggie said impatiently.

“Yeah, okay, I get it. Fast forward to college. She's accepted into Brigham Young on a partial scholarship, and she heads off to Utah to study early developmental teaching. She wants to become a teacher for young children.”

“With you so far.”

“Nothing happens her freshman and sophomore years, at least nothing that I know of. She starts dating a guy named Charles Reed, and she moves

into a small apartment with a woman named Hazel Watterson.”

He took a sip of water from his cup. “Now it’s her junior year. During Christmas break, both her boyfriend and her roommate disappear. Morrigan is back in Lamplight Woods for the holidays at the time, so she isn’t seen as a person of interest in the disappearances. Their bodies are found the day before she returns to college at a construction site a few blocks from her apartment. They’re mangled almost beyond identification. One of the investigating officers described them as looking like they had been mauled by wild animals.”

“Christ,” Maggie muttered.

“This is the start of a string of killings that all have some connection to Morrigan Clay. One of her teachers is found murdered in an alley behind a motel. A woman she works with at the campus bookstore is torn to pieces in a restaurant parking lot during the night. A classmate is ripped in half and left floating in a pool.”

“If these people were all connected to her, she has to have been investigated as a suspect.”

Michael shook his head. “Not thoroughly. She had an airtight alibi for every killing. There were some other people with connections to all of the victims as well, and some of them didn’t have alibis for all of the murders. It would have been difficult for the police to focus on her as the killer. Not to mention that they weren’t even sure if all the killings were related.”

“But you’re sure that she *is* connected to them.”

“My contact included the case files for the victims, at least the parts available to the public. I didn’t print them off because it would have taken hours, but I did give each one a quick look. Clay’s boyfriend and roommate had been spotted together at a movie the night before they went missing. The theater’s assistant manager recognized them because he had seen them groping each other before the movie started.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Her boyfriend was cheating on her with her roommate. That’s definitely motive.”

“The woman at the bookstore that worked with Clay was a known bully, one of those rich kids that look down on everyone around them. The teacher had multiple complaints about unwanted sexual advances towards female students. The guy at the pool was not only a known drug dealer, but he was suspected of being a thief as well.”

“I see where you’re going with this.” Maggie crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re saying that Morrigan went on some, what, divine crusade against people that wronged her.”

“Exactly. In her mind it probably wasn’t even murder. It was balancing the scales. I think that she summoned demons just like she has here in Lamplight Woods, and she used them to kill off those people. That’s how she always had an alibi. She didn’t have to be present for the demons to do their jobs.”

“I have to admit that makes sense. Okay, let’s say that’s true. Why is she continuing it here in Lamplight Woods?”

Michael flipped to a specific page in the pile and tore it out, handing it over to her. “The expansion of Lamplight Woods has had some negative effects on her life. According to a court filing, before she moved back to town she had a handshake agreement with Grace Claredon to buy some land to build a house on. Claredon ended up terminating that agreement when SMR offered her a much higher number and purchased all of it instead of just a single lot.”

“Well fuck.”

“Her parents both died within the space of a year, and they were both against Dilfer’s plan to expand the town. Very vocally, in fact. Apparently things got pretty heated during a town hall meeting, and they stormed out of it vowing to stop the expansion. From what I can tell, they were just this side of being isolationists. They wanted Lamplight Woods to stay the way that it always had been, and the expansion plan was the exact opposite of that.”

Maggie closed her eyes. “So Morrigan believes that her family has been wronged, and she starts to go after people that she holds responsible. She takes it one step further, too. She uses the children of people she sees as invaders of her hometown to do it. What a sick fuck.”

Michael nodded. “The problem is that we can’t *prove* any of this. There’s no solid physical evidence linking Morrigan Clay to any of the murders.”

“Well, if it helps, you’ve definitely convinced *me*.”

He smiled. "That actually does help."

The front door of the store was flung open so hard that it shook the walls. Sarah and Josh hurried inside and slammed the door shut. They looked terrified.

"What's wrong?" Michael demanded, immediately moving towards them.

"It's the Well Witch," Sarah said, trying to catch her breath.

"What about her?"

"She popped up again when we were getting lunch. We came right here, but she was waiting for us when we got here."

"She's here *now*?"

"She's outside."

Michael went over to the closest window and looked out, with Maggie joining him a few seconds later. Standing in the middle of the front yard, her hair a tangled mess and her nightgown covered in dirt, was a young girl. He recognized her as Blake Paulson, one of the missing children.

His jaw tightened as a thought came to him. It hadn't been that long ago that Sarah had been her age. He couldn't imagine how scared she must have been as the demon began to take hold of her.

A car pulled up in the road behind her and a woman got out. He didn't recognize her, but Maggie did.

“Morrigan Clay,” she hissed from between clenched teeth.

Clay said a few words to the girl that he couldn't hear before getting back in her car and driving away. The child watched her leave before she turned her head towards the window they were looking out of and slowly opened her mouth. It opened far wider than it should have been able to, revealing a black void within it.

Fingers began to appear from inside the void. They reached out and gripped onto each side of the girl's mouth, forcing the opening wider. There was something else in the center of the darkness, but he couldn't quite make out what it was. It was rounded, like the top of a head. Two silvery orbs became visible. They were the eyes of whatever creature existed inside.

“What do we do?” Sarah asked him anxiously.

“Go lock every door and window,” Michael instructed her, not taking his eyes off of the demon. “Close the curtains and blinds. We need to make it as difficult as possible for it to get inside. Once you do that, go find Mira and keep close to it.”

“Right.”

She grabbed Josh's hand and they hurried off to lock down Forgotten Tales.

“Can she be saved, do you think?” Maggie asked, bringing up a question that he hadn't even considered.

“I... don’t know,” he replied hesitantly. “I think the boys that have become Mister Skitter and Skinrot are too far gone, but I don’t know about her. This looks like a different kind of transformation. Two separate entities instead of one.”

“We have to try.”

“We will. We have to make sure that she doesn’t kill us first, though.”

“Salt, iron, and silver, right?”

He nodded. “Check the top right drawer in the desk in the study. I packed some rock salt shells for you and put them in there. Your shotgun is still in the trunk of your car, right?”

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “I won’t be able to get to it with her out there.”

“Get the shells. Grab me one of the pokers from next to the fireplace, too. They’re made of iron.”

Maggie looked at him suspiciously. “What exactly are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that you need a distraction so that you can get to that shotgun.”

Between the two of them, Sarah and Josh managed to secure all the doors and windows on the first floor within a few minutes. The thick curtains blocked out much of the sunlight, casting everything in an odd dim orangish brown. They also prevented the heat from escaping, and both teenagers were sweating by the time they reached the second floor and continued their work.

Sarah paused as she came to the final room. It was her grandfather's bedroom, and even though she had already been in it once there was still a strange sense of foreboding. It felt like she wasn't supposed to go inside.

She shook off the feeling and opened the door. Everything was exactly as she had left it. She crossed over to the single window, made sure that the lock was engaged, and pulled the curtains shut.

"I've got the bathroom windows taken care of," Josh said as he joined her in the hallway. "The small one up near the ceiling doesn't have blinds, so I shoved some towels up against it to block the view."

"Good idea," she said. "Have you seen Mira?"

"Yeah, it's sleeping in your room."

He had barely finished the sentence when Mira walked out of the bedroom, the hair on its back standing up. It either sensed that something was wrong, or their mad dash through the house had

freaked it out. She had to admit that it wasn't the only one feeling on edge.

She snapped her head towards the stairs when she heard the front door being opened. Her first instinct was to run downstairs to see what was going on, but she resisted the urge. Instead, she went over to the top step and listened.

"What is it?" Josh asked, his voice betraying his anxiety.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "It sounds like my dad is outside yelling."

She hesitated briefly before going back into her grandfather's room. Out of all the rooms on the second floor, it offered the best view of the front lawn. She gripped the curtain but paused before opening it. Her father had specifically told her to close everything. She could hear him shouting, though, and she needed to know if he was all right. She pushed aside the curtain as little as possible and peered out.

The Well Witch was standing on the lawn. She had gotten closer to the house, but she was turned away from the front door. At first Sarah couldn't see what she was looking at, but then her father came into view near the side of the house. He was holding a long fireplace poker and was speaking loudly to the girl. It was difficult to make out what he was saying.

It didn't matter, however. Sheriff Grant appeared from under the roof of the porch and slowly made her way towards her car. Sarah's father was acting as a distraction, keeping the Well Witch's attention firmly on him so that the sheriff could make it to the vehicle.

Without warning, the Well Witch spun around to face the woman. Sheriff Grant froze for half a second before giving up all pretense of stealth and making a run for the car. She wasn't going to make it, and it was clear that she knew it.

The girl didn't make a move to stop her, however. Instead, the Well Witch bolted towards the front door so fast that Sarah barely registered what was happening. The sound of wood splintering and breaking was audible through the bedroom floor. It grew louder as the door was assaulted a second time.

Her father was shouting again, but there was a different tone in his voice this time. He wasn't just trying to distract the child anymore. He was challenging it.

There was a thumping noise on the side of the house. It was followed by a series of pops and cracks. Her father was looking up now, his face both angry and frightened. He disappeared under the porch roof.

"Oh, shit!" Sarah exclaimed, hurriedly letting go of the curtain and nearly tripping over the edge of the bed as she ran back out into the hallway.

"What?" Josh demanded.

"She's climbing up the side of the house!"

The ceiling above them creaked. The Well Witch had reached the roof. They could hear the sound of light footsteps moving across the shingles. Mira bared its fangs but didn't make a sound.

The footsteps moved over to the far side of the roof. They stopped as they reached the edge of the house above Sarah's bedroom. Moving as quietly as she could, she crept over to the door and carefully closed it. It squeaked on its hinges as it moved, but it wasn't loud enough that it could be heard from outside.

She motioned to the top of the stairs and started towards them. She stopped when she saw Josh forcefully waving at her not to go down them. He pointed up at the ceiling, then brought his index finger down so that it was pointing at the floor. He was trying to tell her something, but she wasn't understanding. She frowned and shook her head. Giving up on miming, he instead silently mouthed a single word.

Chimney.

Her eyes widened as she nodded. The Well Witch was on the side of the house with the chimney. If the girl heard them moving down the stairs, she could simply drop down the chimney and be directly in their path. They needed to wait for her to make her move so that they could react accordingly.

Glass shattered on the other side of the bedroom door as the Well Witch broke through the window. Sarah and Josh looked at each other for a split second before both started down the stairs. If she was coming in on the second floor, it meant they were clear to head downstairs.

They almost made it to the landing halfway down the stairs when the window there burst inward. The curtains were ripped down, and a snake-like creature

came through the opening. Sarah froze on the step she was standing on. It was black and red, and it reminded her of severely burned flesh. There were three appendages on the front of it, and dozens of small eyes stared out from holes along its body.

She realized that it wasn't a snake that she was looking at. The three appendages were fingers, the same kind that she had seen reach out from the Well Witch's mouth. What was blocking their path was one of the arms that were attached to those fingers. An impossibly long arm with eyes covering it.

Abandoning their plan, they turned and bolted back up the stairs. The arm lashed out, and the fingers barely missed Sarah's legs as they rounded the corner. Josh was slightly ahead of her, and he threw his body up against the door to her bedroom in an attempt to keep it closed as it shook violently.

"Please tell me that you have a plan," he said, gritting his teeth as the door shook again.

She looked around as she desperately tried to come up with one. More windows began to break in the other upstairs rooms, and she hurriedly shut the remaining doors. As she closed the one leading into the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of another arm slithering inside. At first she thought that it was the same one that had attacked them on the landing, but she could still hear that one moving around down below.

"I've got nothing," she admitted.

She jumped as her phone rang. She hadn't even remembered that she had it on her. She quickly pulled it out of her pocket and answered it.

“Sarah!” her father practically yelled into her ear. “Are you okay?”

“Uh, depends on your definition of okay,” she told him. “We’re trapped on the second floor. There are all these arm... *things* coming through the windows. We can’t get downstairs.”

“All right, listen closely. Go over to the hallway closet.”

She did as she was told. “Okay. Now what?”

“Open the door.”

She pulled the door open and looked inside. There were coats hanging from a metal rod, and near the top was a shelf packed with shoe boxes. There wasn’t much else.

“Feel around where the back wall meets the floor. You’re looking for a small switch. It’s somewhere near the left corner.”

Trying to ignore the banging coming from every room around her, she got down on her knees and ran her hand slowly over the section of floor her father had indicated. It took a few moments, but the tips of her fingers eventually touched metal.

“I found it,” she said.

“Good,” her father answered. “Press it.”

She pushed down on the switch. With a quiet hiss of escaping air, the back wall of the closet slid upward a couple of inches.

Momentarily forgetting the danger they were in, she pushed the wall all the way up along its hidden track. It moved easily. Behind it was a narrow spiral staircase that led downward.

“Sarah?” her father prompted, his voice nervous.

“I’m here, Dad,” she assured him. “There are some stairs.”

“Good. The three of you need to go down there and wait for me to come get you. Shut the closet door when you’re inside and close the wall behind you. You won’t get any signal on your phone, so I just need you to wait, okay?”

“Okay. Dad, what is this, some kind of panic room?”

“Something like that. Forgotten Tales has a lot of secrets. Now hurry and get out of there.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be okay. Trust me. Go!”

Michael hung up the phone and looked back up at the creature standing on the roof. The girl's head was tilted back, and half a dozen tentacle-like arms were extended out from her open mouth. There had to be some limit as to how far they could reach, but if there was, they hadn't hit it yet. They had broken into the house from every direction as they sought out Sarah and Josh.

At least the kids were safe. The staircase in the closet led far below Forgotten Tales, and there was no way this thing was going to find them down there. That meant that he could focus on how to stop it without worrying about Sarah.

"I think I prefer Mister Skitter," Maggie commented as she loaded the rock salt shells into her shotgun. "At least he can only come at you from one direction."

Her voice was steady and light, but he could tell that she was forcing it to be. He had to admit that he was scared as well. He had always thought of Forgotten Tales as a sanctuary, somewhere that was protected from the supernatural. Having that misguided belief shattered was unnerving.

"We have to get her down from the roof," he said. "We can't risk taking her on up there."

"My thoughts exactly," Maggie agreed. "Even if we managed to miraculously stop her up there, it's a steep roof. Blake might fall."

He nodded. If they were going to have any chance of separating the girl from the demon, they had to ensure that she wasn't seriously hurt. That added more complication to an already extremely complicated situation.

"I'm open to suggestions," he said.

Maggie didn't respond. Instead, she reached down and picked up a rock from the ground. She hefted it a few times to gauge the weight. When she was seemingly satisfied, she took a step back and hurled it up at the girl.

The rock landed on the roof a few feet away from the Well Witch. At first Michael thought Maggie had missed, but when the sheriff nodded he realized that she hadn't actually been aiming at the child. She had just been trying to get her attention. The sound of the rock striking the shingles was loud, and a few of the arms retracted out of the house and moved towards the noise.

Maggie was already aiming the shotgun. It was a long shot, especially with rock salt loaded instead of standard ammunition. She pulled the trigger and the weapon roared as it fired.

Two of the arms jerked violently. The girl shrieked in pain, and the arms that had remained inside the house pulled back out and swung towards the threat.

"That worked," Maggie said as she pumped another shell into the chamber.

"A little *too* well," Michael commented as he started to back up slowly.

The arms had gripped the edges of the roof and lifted the girl's body into the air. They started to move back down the side of the building like a hideous six-legged spider. All of the eyes that were embedded into the arms were staring directly at them.

"At least she's coming down from the roof," Maggie said.

"Yeah, right down on top of us," Michael shot back. "We need to deal with those arms if we're going to have any chance at this."

"How are we going to do that?"

"I don't..." He stopped as he thought of something. "I might have an idea. I don't know if it will work, but maybe..."

"I'm all ears."

Before he could respond, the Well Witch leaped off the side of the house. They each ran in a different direction, and the creature landed hard on the ground where they had been standing less than a second before. Two arms whipped out, one towards each of them. Maggie managed to fend hers off with another blast from the shotgun, but Michael was forced to throw himself out of the way. He winced as he struck the hard ground and scrambled back to his feet.

"Get to the backyard!" he yelled as he sprinted down the driveway.

He risked a glance over his shoulder as he ran. The Well Witch had decided to follow Maggie instead of him, probably because the gun made her a bigger threat. There wasn't anything that he could do to help

her, so he turned his attention back to what he was doing and hoped that she would be all right.

He ignored the garage and instead headed towards the small shed at the far end of the yard. He reached it and flung the door open. Breathing heavily, he opened the hatch and turned around just in time to see Maggie coming around the other side of the house. The Well Witch was close behind her. She saw him waving at her and adjusted her course so that she was coming directly towards him.

Maggie was running surprisingly fast, but she shouldn't have been able to get away from the creature that was chasing her. It had shown when it was breaking into the house that the arms could extend to great lengths. If it just reached out with one of them while the other five continued to propel it forward, it would easily be able to catch her.

The fact that it wasn't doing so was telling. Either she had hurt it with the shotgun more than he had originally thought, or it was being overly cautious. Whatever the case, he hoped it would give his plan more of a chance of working.

He went down the steps and into the slaughterhouse-like room below. He turned on the power, and the overhead lights flickered on. Next to the breaker box were two small red buttons that he had noticed when he had come down earlier in the week. He pressed the bottom one and felt a small surge of relief as the sharp hooks attached to the ceiling began to lower. They stopped a few inches above the concrete floor.

Maggie barely made it to the stairs before the Well Witch smashed into the shed. She ducked as she hurried down the steps. Debris rained down through the hatch as the shed was ripped free from the yard and broken into countless pieces.

She stopped at the bottom of the steps as she saw where she was. Her expression was a combination of curiosity and revulsion. She quickly shook it off and came over to help him as he grabbed two of the hooks.

“Two per arm?” she asked, indicating that she had caught on to his plan.

“Hopefully it will be enough,” Michael answered.

There was a big flaw in his idea, and he knew it. If the Well Witch decided to retreat back inside the girl and simply walk her down the stairs, they were going to be trapped. It could reach the bottom of the stairs, open the mouth, and kill them with little trouble. He was betting on the demon continuing to be cautious.

He smiled tightly as the first arm snaked down through the hatch and into the room. The Well Witch was using it to scout ahead. Before it could react, he lunged forward and sank the hook he was holding into the flesh. The arm whipped back and forth as it tried to get free, but the hook and chain held. Maggie took the opportunity to dig hers into a space between the fingers.

The second arm came faster than he was expecting, and he barely had time to move out of the way as it lashed out at him. Maggie grabbed a hook in each hand and swung them down as hard as she could. The points pierced deep into the skin, and she

twisted them hard to the right to really sink them in. Both trapped arms flailed wildly, but they remained restrained.

“I think it’s working,” Maggie said in a tone that made it clear that she hadn’t been hopeful about the plan.

Michael had expected a third arm to appear, but nothing happened. He scowled.

“Shit,” he muttered. “It knows what we’re up to.”

“I think it’s worse than that,” Maggie said. “Look.”

Two small feet appeared at the top of the steps. The girl herself was entering the room. That meant that all four arms were going to be available to use at the same time in less than a minute. When that happened, they were going to be overwhelmed.

“Where does that door go?” Maggie asked, pointing at the heavy metal door on the other side of the room.

“Into a short tunnel that leads into a wide room with cages,” he answered.

“Cages? No, never mind, we don’t have time for that now.”

“Maggie, I swear that I had nothing to do with this place.”

“Later.”

They turned the large wheel together and opened the door. They only managed to get a few steps inside of the tunnel before the Well Witch reached the

first room and screamed at them in rage. Michael tried to get the door shut again, but two of the arms shot out of her mouth and forced it back open before he could lock it. He ran to the opposite end of the passageway. Maggie had already gotten the second door open, and this time they were able to get through it and lock it behind them before the Well Witch could catch up.

“I can’t believe we made it,” Maggie said, setting the end of the shotgun down on the ground while she took a few deep breaths.

“Yeah,” Michael replied. “The only problem is that now we’re trapped in here.”

There was a loud boom as the metal door shook in its frame. Dust and dirt fell from the room’s ceiling as the vibration ran through it. The door shook again, and this time he saw one of the heavy bolts holding the frame to the wall come partly out. At the rate it was going, the Well Witch would break through it in a matter of minutes.

“Okay, maybe that’s not our *only* problem,” he admitted.

The winding staircase went down much further than Sarah had expected. She had always been a terrible judge of height and distance, but it was obvious that they had gone well below the house's basement by the time they reached the bottom. There were no lights, and they needed to use their phones to illuminate the darkness.

At the bottom of the metal stairs was a wooden door. It was heavy and ornate, with leaves and vines having been carved into it by someone with a lot of skill. She ran a hand over it. It was cooler than she had expected it to be.

"Are we on the right floor?" Josh asked.

"What?" she responded, confused by the question.

"The stairs keep going down."

She turned her phone's light in the direction that he was indicating. While the stairs they had followed stopped on this floor, there was another set of them near the wall that continued down into the darkness. She leaned over the hole slightly to look down, and she felt cold air rising up out of it.

"I don't know," she said. "Dad said to go down the stairs, but he didn't say how far."

They stood in silence for a couple of minutes. The glow from his phone revealed enough of his face to show that Josh was nervous. She knew exactly how he felt.

“I think these other stairs are newer,” he said finally. “They’re made of a different metal, and there isn’t any rust on them.”

“Maybe my grandfather put them in after my dad and I left,” Sarah suggested. “Let’s try the door. There’s no point in going down further than we need to.”

He nodded once. She went back to the door and turned the bronze doorknob. It moved easily in her hand. She pushed it open and they went into the room beyond.

“There’s a switch here,” Josh said as he examined the wall just inside the door with his phone.

“Go for it,” she prompted.

He flipped the switch, and a series of lights attached to the ceiling turned on. The space was larger than it had first seemed, easily as large as the main house’s first floor. It was the strangest room that she had ever been in, and that was including the hidden study.

One wall was filled with old televisions and computer monitors. They stretched from the floor to the ceiling on wooden shelves and metal mounts. Directly in front of them was a table that resembled the kind used in her school’s chemistry classroom. On top of it was a computer tower that had to have been close to thirty years old. It even had a drive for floppy disks. A tan square monitor and a yellowed keyboard were attached to it.

The opposite wall featured a collection of tubes, beakers, and other glass instruments that looked like

they had been taken right out of a 1950s mad scientist movie. Liquids of all colors and consistencies filled the containers. Some of the containers sat on top of burners that clearly hadn't been used in years.

The rest of the room was packed with cardboard boxes, plastic containers, and other assorted items. Sarah lifted a flap on one of the boxes and found that it contained a small skeleton. It looked like a human infant's skeleton, except that there were two wing-like protrusions coming out of the spine.

"What is this place?" Josh asked, his voice hushed.

She didn't have an answer for him. She watched as the computer tower booted up, its hard drive grinding and screeching as it did so. It must have been set to turn on and off with the light switch.

She looked up as one by one the televisions and monitors on the wall turned on. Some of the images were displayed in color, but the majority of them were in black and white. Each picture showed something different.

"What the hell is this?" Josh asked, going over to one of the monitors. "Is this live?"

He was looking at the image of a large iron gate. It was halfway open, its broken lock lying on the ground next to it. Sarah noticed that the trees in the background were moving as the wind blew through them. It wasn't a picture. It was a video.

"No, wait, it's not," he corrected himself. "There's a time stamp in the corner."

She joined him at the monitor and looked closer. In the top right corner of the screen was a date: March 28, 2007. The time next to it indicated that it was just after midnight.

“I don’t get it,” she asked. “What’s so important about a gate?”

Her nerves were still frayed from their escape from the Well Witch, and she jumped when a large dog sprinted into the frame and came to a stop in front of the gate. It was huge, at least the size of a car. She leaned forward to get a better look. On closer examination, it wasn’t a dog at all. The front legs were much larger and more muscular than the back ones, and it didn’t have a snout. The face was shaped more like a bat’s than a dog’s. Its body was covered in coarse hairs.

The creature sniffed at the gate with its flat nose. Seemingly coming to some sort of decision, it smashed into the gate with the full weight of its body, tearing one side of it off the hinges. There wasn’t any sound, but she was sure that the metal hitting the ground that hard would have been deafening. The creature lunged through the opening and out of sight.

“All of these are showing something different,” Josh said as he took a long step back to view the entire wall at once. “Everything is... *weird*.”

She took a look for herself, and she instantly saw what he meant. Each of the screens was showing something supernatural taking place. Some of them were still images, and others were videos of varying quality. It was a bit overwhelming.

On one television she saw a dark shape swimming just below the surface of a pool. The monitor next to it displayed a picture of three men dressed in suits with pointed teeth and no noses. The third screen showed something that looked very much like Bigfoot resting against a tree.

“Wait,” she said. “I think those five screens up at the top in the middle are live.”

Each of the screens that she was looking at were showing live streams from different places around the Forgotten Tales property. One showed the front yard, with the sheriff’s car visible in the driveway. Another showed the backyard. The other three were images from the underground facility.

The blood drained from her face. One of the screens showed her father and Sheriff Grant in the room with the cages. They were clearly agitated as they talked and pointed in various directions. Every few seconds the image shook, and each time they would look at the door leading into the room.

She turned her attention to the monitor showing the room with the hooks. Two of the Well Witch’s tentacle-like arms were pierced by hooks, and they thrashed wildly as they tried to free themselves. The more they moved around, though, the more tangled they were becoming in the chains hanging from the ceiling.

“It must be in the tunnel,” she said.

“I didn’t follow that,” Josh replied.

“Sorry. Talking to myself. These are showing the inside of the underground structure that I told you

about. Two of the Well Witch's arms are stuck in the hooks, but she's not there. She must be inside the connecting tunnel."

He quickly scanned the three monitors. "Is there another way out of there?"

"Not that I saw. They're in the second room, and beyond that is another short tunnel and the last room. It's a dead end."

"We need to do something. That door isn't going to hold much longer."

"I know, but what *can* we do?"

From the far corner of the room, standing next to a stack of equipment covered in a sheet, Mira made a half-chirp, half-bark noise to get their attention.

“These cages have electrical wires running down into them,” Maggie said as she inspected the nearest one. “We could pull out the wires and try to electrocute the thing.”

“We can,” Michael agreed, having already thought of that particular solution. “I doubt it would work, but we could try. The problem is that we have no idea how much voltage those wires are carrying.”

She sighed. “You’re worried about hurting Blake.”

“Yeah. There’s no way to know how much damage the shock would do to her.”

Maggie hesitated before saying, “We might have to choose between her and us.”

“I know.” He ran a hand over his face. “I don’t know if I can kill a kid to save my own life.”

“I’m *certain* that I can’t. What if we go through that other door? I know you said it’s a dead end, but maybe we can barricade ourselves in. Buy some more time to figure this out.”

He shook his head. “It’s a lot more cramped in there. It would only make it easier on her.”

On one wall was a series of metal shelves with various tools and containers on them. He crossed over to them and started looking for anything that they could use. Most of the containers were partially filled with nuts, bolts, and other building materials, while the

rest were empty. The tools were almost all broken, and the ones that weren't were too small to be useful.

He had just started to turn away when he noticed a pipe running along the side of the leftmost shelving unit. Someone had painted it black, which had made it impossible to see until he was right next to it. It ran up from the floor and into the ceiling.

"Find anything?" Maggie asked.

"No," he answered, turning towards her. "Just a bunch of junk and this pipe."

She followed it with her eyes from the ground up to the top of the chamber. "Looks like a water pipe. What do you suppose those smaller ones are for?"

He hadn't noticed the small pieces of piping connecting into the larger one towards the top. There were six of them, each one a different color. He hadn't seen a hookup like that before, but his knowledge of plumbing was very limited. Whatever the system was for, it wasn't likely to be of any help to them.

The door let out a high-pitched whine as it started to bend out of its frame. He looked over at it just in time to see the top separate from the wall completely, leaving a small gap. Three fingers wrapped around it slowly. They had maybe another minute at most before the Well Witch broke through.

"How many more shells do you have?" he asked.

"Three," Maggie replied tensely, not taking her eyes off of the door.

“If you can hurt those arms enough, maybe we can run past it while it’s hurting.”

“You can’t seriously think that’s going to work.”

“I don’t. I just don’t have any better ideas. You?”

She grunted. “Let’s do it.”

The room was suddenly filled with an extraordinarily loud crackling sound. It was like a burst of static, and Michael instinctively covered his ears. Maggie wasn’t able to do so while still keeping her grip on the shotgun, and she visibly winced.

“Dad?” a voice said as the crackling subsided. “Dad, can you hear me?”

“Sarah?” Michael asked in shock.

“Yeah, it’s me. Thank God. I didn’t know if this was going to work or not.”

He scanned the room until he found what he was looking for. A speaker was mounted in one of the dark corners. Sarah must have found a way to tap into some sort of audio system that both transmitted and received sound.

“We’re in the room that you sent us to,” Sarah continued. “We can see you guys on the security feed. The Well Witch is almost through the door.”

“We’ve noticed,” he replied dryly.

“Sarcasm later. There’s a big control panel here, and Josh thinks that it controls some things down there. Lights, sprinkler systems, power, that sort of thing. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“I don’t know what...” He jerked his head back towards the pipe. “You can turn on the sprinkler system?”

“Josh thinks he can, yeah.”

The door started to bend in half from the top down. More of the arms appeared in the gap. The demon would be through any second.

“There are six small pipes leading into the water system here,” Michael said, speaking quickly. “Can you tell me what they’re for?”

“Hold on.”

He could hear Sarah relaying his question to someone away from the microphone. There was a pause, and for a brief moment the only sound was the door being mangled.

“Josh says that it looks like it’s some sort of additive system,” Sarah said. “It mixes things with the water. There’s a button for each one, and they’re each labeled with a different material. There’s gold, chlorine, lead, electrum, salt, and... dish soap?”

“Salt!” Maggie exclaimed. “Turn on the sprinklers and add salt.”

“No, wait!” Michael said quickly. “Add electrum instead.”

“But demons are hurt by salt.”

The door collapsed all the way in, and the Well Witch pulled itself into the room. It positioned itself so that it was blocking the doorway and immediately

began to advance towards them. The two nearest arms reached out for them.

“Electrum, Sarah!” Michael shouted. “Do it!”

He looked over at Maggie. She was staring at him with fear in her eyes, the shotgun raised towards the demon. He could tell that she didn’t understand why he wasn’t wanting to use the one thing that had proven to be effective against demons, but he didn’t have time to explain it.

“Trust me,” he pleaded.

Her expression changed, and she nodded. Turning back to the Well Witch, she fired a shot into the nearest arm. The creature screeched in pain, but it kept coming. It was so blinded by rage that it was ignoring everything except the desire to rip them apart.

“Fuck!” Sarah yelled over the speaker. “It’s not working! Dad, I’m sorry, we... Wait. There it goes. It’s mixing! It’s going to take a few-”

Her voice was cut off as one of the Well Witch’s arms lashed out and tore the speaker off of the wall. Michael used the momentary distraction to run over to the door leading to the holding cells. He grabbed the wheel and started to turn it. The shotgun fired again, the sound echoing throughout the room. The door unlocked, and he pulled it open.

Maggie saw what he was doing and started moving slowly towards him. Firing one more time, she turned on her heel and ran through the doorway. Michael quickly followed her and started to pull the door shut.

Two of the Well Witch's arms whipped through the gap, their fingers grabbing onto the door and pulling it back open. Michael put all of his weight into it, but his feet slid on the ground as he was pulled along with the door. Maggie dropped the now empty shotgun and grabbed the wheel as well. The door stopped moving. Even with their combined effort they weren't able to get it to start closing, however. They were in a stalemate that they couldn't possibly maintain.

Within a few seconds his legs started screaming at him in exhaustion, and he could see the veins in Maggie's neck bulging as she pulled. The door was already starting to open again. They weren't going to make it.

A blast of water struck him in the face. The sprinkler system had begun to spray from hidden sprinkler heads in the ceiling. The Well Witch howled, and it stopped pulling on the door. Michael wanted nothing more than to collapse, but he forced himself to get back up and return to the cage room. They had to work fast.

The Well Witch was flailing wildly on the ground, the skin of its arms bubbling as the flesh burned. Tissue and blood were flying in every direction, but he ignored it as he searched for the little girl's body. It was near the center of the mass, the arms still stretching out from her mouth. Narrowly avoiding one of the tendrils as it slapped down onto the ground next to him, he grabbed her legs and pulled.

Her eyes widened as the creature inside of her realized what he was doing. It didn't seem to have control of its limbs, though, and it wasn't able to defend itself. He pulled as hard as he could.

He felt something wrap around his waist, and he turned his head slightly to see Maggie with her arms around him. He nodded, and together they pulled as hard as they could. At first it didn't seem like the effort was going to be enough. After what seemed like an eternity, the demon started to slide out from inside the girl's mouth.

Something hideous was emerging as they pulled, but he looked away and concentrated on the task at hand. Finally, with one last heave, the demon fully emerged and the girl's mouth clamped shut. She moaned and immediately started gasping for air. Maggie picked the girl up and tried to comfort her.

"How do we kill it?" the sheriff asked, purposely keeping her head turned away from the creature writhing on the floor.

"It's already dead," Michael said, watching as the arms stopped moving. "The electromagnet is seeing to that."

"What is that stuff?"

"It's an alloy, a mixture of silver, gold, and other naturally occurring metals. It's basically a cocktail of things that hurt paranormal beings. This sprinkler system must have been intended as some kind of failsafe." He shook his head. "My father was a bastard, but luckily for us he was a paranoid bastard. Sarah, Josh, if you can still hear me, great job, you two."

"Dad," Sarah's voice answered from another speaker in the far corner of the room, "when we tried to get the mixture to work, it came up with an error

and the whole computer system froze up. Whoever got it to work... it wasn't us."

From deeper in the facility, Billy Baxter's laugh filled the air.

Maggie was speaking with Mayor Dilfer on the front steps when Michael arrived at the house. He turned off the car's engine and watched them for a moment. He was tired and sore from recent events, and all that he really wanted to do was go back to *Forgotten Tales* and continue with the repairs. There hadn't been as much damage as he had feared, just some broken windows, the busted front door, and some dents and cracks on the outside walls and roof. Even so, he wanted to finish up the repairs so that he didn't have to spend another night with cardboard taped over the various openings.

There were only a few hours of daylight left, and he still had three windows to install. Part of what had taken so long was his admitted lack of skill when it came to home repairs, but mostly it had been due to the other project he had tended to first. While the electrum-laced water had been enough to kill the Well Witch, the demon's body had still needed to be disposed of. The sheer size of it had made getting rid of it rather difficult.

Eventually he had managed to untangle the two arms that had been hooked, gathered everything up into a disgusting pile, and had doused the creature's remains in sulfuric acid. It would take some time, but eventually the acid would dissolve the body. He wasn't looking forward to the cleanup process afterward.

He sighed and got out of the car. He hadn't heard from Maggie in a few days, and his calls to her had

gone to voicemail and remained unanswered. Something had changed when they had been fighting for their lives in the underground facility. Even though she hadn't said anything to him about it, he knew that she had been disturbed by its existence. He had been completely truthful with her when he had said that he had nothing to do with it, but she had looked unconvinced. Showing her the cells afterward hadn't helped, either.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable. He closed the car door and started up the short concrete path. The mayor nodded as he approached them. Maggie looked at him with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Mr. Dyer," Dilfer said. "We've been waiting on you."

Michael immediately bristled. He had driven over as soon as he had gotten the call. It had to have been less than fifteen minutes between receiving the call and his arrival.

"I was washing my hair," he retorted sarcastically. "You don't think that I get these full-bodied curls naturally, do you?"

She frowned at him, clearly unamused. He thought that he saw just the faintest hint of a smile at the edges of Maggie's lips, however.

"Charming," Dilfer said eventually. "Shall we go inside?"

"Actually, Mayor Dilfer, I'd prefer if just Mr. Dyer and myself go in," Maggie said. "This is still an active crime scene."

The older woman regarded her for a few moments. Michael was sure that she wanted to object, but for some reason she didn't. She instead nodded once and started walking towards her car.

"She's been a pain in my ass all day," Maggie commented as she led him up the steps and to the front door.

"What about?" he asked.

"Pretty much everything. Mostly about this place. She wants to get someone in to clean it up, but I made her wait until you took a look at it."

"Where are we, anyway?"

"This," she answered as she opened the front door, "is Morrigan Clay's house."

They stepped inside and he began to look around. The entire entryway and living room looked like they had been designed specifically for children. The carpet was a rainbow of colors, and the walls had been painted to look like a blue sky with white clouds. Small tables and chairs were pushed neatly to one side, and plastic bins with toys were stacked on the other. A small chalkboard with the words 'Always Be Happy' written in green chalk was pointed towards the door.

"It's upstairs," Maggie said as she led him through the daycare.

There was a child safety gate at the bottom of the stairs. She opened it and they went up, each wooden step creaking as weight was put on it. There were pictures on the walls flanking the staircase, each one

depicting Morrigan Clay smiling with a different child. It would have been heartwarming if he hadn't known that she had traded children's lives for her demonic servants.

At the top of the stairs was a small hallway. She led him to one of the doors on the right and motioned for him to look inside. He raised an eyebrow and went through the doorway.

He immediately wished that he hadn't. Blood was everywhere. The boards on the walls had been torn away, and the same tissue and muscle that had been growing in the missing children's rooms was hanging out of the holes. The room reeked of death.

In the very center of the room was Morrigan Clay. She was lying in the middle of an intricate design that had been drawn on the floor. It was circular, and it looked like it had been made with some sort of black sand or ash. He didn't recognize the design.

Clay's body had been mutilated. All of her limbs were contorted at strange angles, and she looked somehow *flat*. It was like every bone in her body had been crushed. There were multiple puncture wounds, most of which would have been fatal.

"Did you bring gloves?" Maggie asked.

"Yeah," he answered simply, pulling the blue latex gloves out of his pocket and putting them on.

"I found a diary in her bedroom. I marked the page with the last entry."

She produced a small white book and handed it to him. There was a slip of paper sticking out of the top,

and he opened the book to the page that it was marking. The script looked like it had been written in a hurry, and there were dark stains on the pages.

I must keep going. There are more sins that must be cleansed before I rest. He warned me the ones I had wouldn't be enough. I don't know how many more I can make. I feel them inside of me now, crawling in my brain and whispering. Always whispering. I feel sick. They know.

He handed the diary back to Maggie and looked back down at the body. Wishing that he had brought a jumpsuit and shoe covers with him, he carefully stepped around the blood splatter, touching as little of it as possible with his feet. He bent down to get a closer look at the corpse.

“She’s been dead for at least thirty-six hours, but it’s more likely it’s been a few days,” he said, probing the body with his fingers. “Probably died the same day she showed up at Forgotten Tales. I’d have to do a full examination to know for sure. Based on the condition I’d say that she suffered numerous catastrophic blows across her body. Normally you only see these types of injuries on someone killed in an industrial or construction accident.”

He picked up one of Clay’s hands and examined it closely. “Every bone in the fingers is broken. No, not just broken. They’ve been pulverized. Hold on, there’s something under her nails.”

He took out a small toolkit from his back pocket and opened it. He extracted a pair of tweezers and set the kit down on the floor. Being careful not to break the already splintered nails, he extracted the

object that had caught his attention. He retrieved a magnifying glass from his kit and carefully examined it.

“It’s skin,” he said. “It’s discolored, but it’s definitely skin. It’s... rotted.”

He put the skin into a sample bag. Putting the bag, magnifying glass, and tweezers away, he unzipped a pocket on the inside of the kit lid and took out a ruler. He quickly measured the puncture wounds. Each of them was the same size. He nodded to himself. The measurements confirmed his suspicions.

“What are you thinking?” Maggie asked.

“These wounds are the same size and shape of the one Mister Skitter left in Grace Claredon’s skull. There’s rotted flesh under her fingernails. I think that her demons turned on her and did this.”

“That was my thought as well. I didn’t come at it from the same scientific angle you did, but it’s what my gut told me.”

He stood back up. “We need to-”

“Check the bedrooms of the two children that are still missing,” she finished for him. “I did that about an hour ago. The blood and tissue are still there. It’s gone from Blake Paulson’s room, but not theirs.”

“So they’re still out there.”

“Looks like it. The mayor isn’t going to wait any longer, though. She’s calling in someone to get everything cleared out of the rooms, as well as get this cleaned up. Johnson, I think his name was.”

Michael blinked. “Stavros Johnson? He’s still alive?”

“Yeah, that’s him. You know him?”

“Since I was a kid. My grandfather used to call him The Cleaner. He specializes in making it look like paranormal events never happened. I’m surprised he’s still around. He was old before I was born.”

She crossed her arms. “The mayor is closing the investigation. She says that she’s going to tell the parents that Morrigan Clay killed the children before taking her own life. I can’t just let her lie to them like that. They deserve to know what happened to their kids.”

Michael was silent.

“What?” she demanded. “You think it’s right for her to lie to them?”

“Honestly?” he replied slowly. “I don’t know. It’s just... Is it better for the parents to believe that their children died quickly, or is it better for them to be told the truth and find out what their children have become, knowing that they can never be saved? I really don’t know the answer to that.”

Maggie looked down at the floor, her face uncertain. He wished that there was something he could say to her to help her with the awful decision she had to make. He knew that there wasn’t.

“Who do you think he was?” she asked finally. “Clay’s diary says that *he* warned her. Who was she talking about?”

“Just another unanswered question,” Michael said. “There are a lot of them when it comes to Clay. Who was she talking about in her journal, how did she learn how to summon demons in the first place, what will Mister Skitter and Skinrot do now that they aren’t leashed by a master. It’s a long list. I’ve got another one to add to it, too.”

“What’s that?”

“Who killed Morrigan Clay?”

Maggie tilted her head slightly. “You just said that the demons did.”

“Yeah, but they were only able to because of this.”

He pointed down to a small section of the circular design on the floor. It was difficult to see, but a thin portion had been scraped away from the design.

“Someone sabotaged her summoning circle,” he said. “It’s such a small bit of damage that she wouldn’t have noticed it unless she was specifically looking for it.”

“It couldn’t have been an accident on her part?” Maggie asked.

He shook his head. “There are scratches in the wood. Someone used a tool, probably a knife, to purposely break the circle. As long as the circle was intact, she could command the demons and keep them in servitude. When it was damaged, though, they were free to turn on her.”

“Do you think it was the same mystery person that hacked into the Forgotten Tales security system and saved our lives?”

“There’s no way to know, but it would be a hell of a coincidence if it isn’t.”

“Fuck.” She shook her head. “Just what I need, another damn mystery. How long will you be in town?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mayor Dilfer forced you into all of this, but before that you had originally planned on being in Lamplight Woods just long enough to settle up your family affairs. Well, now the killer is dead and the mayor is closing the case. Does that mean that you’re leaving?”

Michael didn’t answer immediately.

Sarah was waiting for Michael when he returned to Forgotten Tales. The sun was starting to set behind the trees, and for a moment he didn't see her in the shadows being cast on the porch. She waved pleasantly at him as he got out of the car, and he immediately knew that she was up to something.

"What did you do?" he asked as she sat down on the stone steps.

"Can't a girl just be happy to see her father?" she asked with mock indignation. "Why do I have to have done something?"

"The last time you were waiting outside for me when I got home, you had accidentally set a bagel on fire and didn't want me to go inside until the smoke had cleared out of the kitchen."

"Okay, yes, that *may* have happened, but in my defense I still believe to this day that it was a defective bagel. This time I'm completely innocent of any wrongdoing, though. I just wanted to talk to you."

He sat down on the steps next to her. "I suppose that would be acceptable. What do you want to talk about?"

Sarah was silent as she gathered her thoughts. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, and she was chewing on her lower lip. She looked so much like her mother had at that age that he felt a familiar sad twinge.

“I’ve been thinking about this for the past few days,” she said. “I think that we should stay in Lamplight Woods.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“Please, just hear me out, okay? This town has been our family’s home for generations. The Dyers have kept Lamplight Woods safe, and without us here there won’t be anyone else that can do that. Not from the type of stuff that goes on around here. It’s a really important job, and I don’t think that we should walk away from it.”

He tried to speak again. She kept going before he could get a word in.

“There’s also Forgotten Tales. We can’t just sell it. There’s a lot of dangerous stuff in there, and besides, Great-Grandpa Charles built this place. It wouldn’t be right for us to just abandon it.”

A third attempt to talk met the same fate as the first two.

“And what about Mira? What would happen to it? We can’t just take it with us, and who knows what would happen to it if we just leave it? We can’t do that to Mira.”

He didn’t even try to speak this time.

“Also, you’re getting along really well with Sheriff Grant, and you’re always talking about how you wish that you were able to work in one place instead of driving all over California. You said that Lamplight Woods pays for the Dyer paranormal services, and

we could get Forgotten Tales up and running as a legitimate store again.”

“There’s also Josh,” Michael managed to interject.

“Yeah, exactly, there’s Josh, and he...” She trailed off for a second. “Okay, yes, it’s nice to have someone like him as a friend, but that’s not the biggest reason why I think we should stay.”

“Uh huh.” He grinned. “A *friend*.”

She blushed. “Dad, come on, it’s not like that.”

“Do you want it to be?”

Her face turned even more red, and she quickly turned away. “Can we just stick to the subject, please? I really think that we should stay.”

“I’m very glad to hear you say that,” Michael said. “Especially since I’ve already decided that we will be.”

She turned back towards him. “You have?”

“Yep. Sure have.”

“So all of this dog and pony show was...”

“Completely unnecessary. Correct.”

She punched him in the arm. “Oh, come on! You could have stopped me at any time. What made you decide to stay?”

“All of the reasons that you just stated, for starters.” He leaned back, putting his elbows on the step behind him. “I also have this... I dunno, this *feeling* that this is where we’re supposed to be.”

Maybe your great-grandfather was right with his idea about paranormal entanglement.”

“You lost me there.”

“Do you know what quantum entanglement is?”

She shook her head.

“It’s pretty complicated, but this is the simplest way that I’ve ever heard it explained. At its most basic, quantum entanglement has to do with particles that are so connected that they can’t even be described separately from each other. Distance doesn’t matter. They’re always connected. Einstein called it spooky action at a distance, although to be fair he was dismissing the theory when he said that.”

“All right. And paranormal entanglement?”

“Your great-grandfather believed that all paranormal events are linked to one another somehow. More than that, he believed that places like Lamplight Woods are connected to them as well. He used to tell me that Lamplight Woods draws in the paranormal like a giant supernatural magnet.”

She considered what he had said. “How about you? Do you believe that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Your mother did. She was right most of the time, too. Maybe we’ll find out someday for sure.”

“So we’re definitely staying?”

“We’re definitely staying.”

=Epilogue=

Sarah left her father sitting on the porch as she went back inside. They had talked for a while after he had informed her of his decision, and even though the conversation had been trivial in the grand scheme of things, it had still been nice. It had just been the two of them all of her life, and it was good to know that they hadn't grown apart during everything that had happened.

She closed the front door of the house and headed upstairs. Mira appeared on the landing, and it dutifully followed her as she ascended the stairs. When she reached the top, she withdrew a folded piece of paper from the right pocket of her shorts. She had found it in the room she and Josh had gone to during the Well Witch's attack on the house.

She unfolded the paper and read it for what must have been the hundredth time. It was written in her grandfather's now unmistakable handwriting. Unlike the writing in his journal and on the pages she had taken from the trailer, however, this writing was clear and bold with no other scribbled notes or drawings on the paper.

Evelyn Stone. Flesh to form.

She carefully folded the paper back up and returned it to her pocket. She looked down at Mira, and it returned her gaze without making a sound. Nodding once, she went over to the hallway closet and opened it.

“All right, Grandpa,” she muttered to herself as she bent down to flip the hidden switch. “Time to find out just what you were up to.”

THE END