

# Consecration

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Published: 2014



“Is that it?” Chad asked as he slowed the SUV. Zoey offered no reply. “Hey, c’mon. Is that the place or not?”

Reaching from the back seat, Gina laid a hand upon her shoulder from behind. “Zoey?”

“Yeah,” she finally said with a sigh, letting out a breath that she hadn’t realized she had been holding in. “Yeah, that’s the place. That’s... that was where it happened.”

“Just looks like a little forest in the middle of friggin’ nowhere. You can’t even hardly see the house from the road,” Mike commented from the back seat. “Sure doesn’t look haunted to me.”

Zoey shook her head lightly. “It’s not supposed to.”

Chad brought the Explorer to a halt in front of what was supposed to be a house, but what now resembled nothing more than a huge pile of closely-knit poplar and oak trees tangled with an overgrowth of weeds, vines, and shrubs that had been neglected for decades. It seemed almost as if it had been deliberately

obscured from view because, as Zoey believed, the cursed site was closing in upon itself in the shadow of its very own darkness. That, or perhaps the earth was making a gradual effort to swallow the building whole, to smother its evil with the green substances of life, thereby returning it to the soil from whence it had arisen. Everywhere else, in all four directions, there was nothing to see but clear blue skies and ripe fields of wheat that rippled in small waves with the breeze, like an island of green sticking up in the middle of a golden ocean.

Zoey was torn between wanting to stare out the side window at what she knew was a dark den of foul karma, or straight ahead to the place where her brother's life had been snuffed out at the age of seventeen. Both sights, in spite of the degree to which they had changed over the years, were equal sources of unpleasantness, the source of so many memory-filled nightmares over the years. For her, a decade ago, it had taken only about an hour of one day to make those into very personal, very terrifying images.

Zoey lagged behind the other three as they approached the house with a sense of curiosity that far outweighed Zoey's dread. Like the rest of the property, the driveway was far overgrown with knee-high grass, only giving the barest hint of two tracks in the vegetation to indicate where tires had worn a path leading up alongside the right-hand side of the place. To the right of the drive, there were hulking masses of old, rusted, broken-down and abandoned farm equipment – antique plows, balers, and an incomplete tractor with spiked wheels of iron. The house, itself, was barely visible to the left, even as they knew they were standing right beside it. Vines and trees had obliterated it from sight so thoroughly that it looked more like a giant greenhouse than a farmhouse.

There was some joking and snickers as they rounded the rear corner of the house and spotted the outhouse, a completely authentic, old-school little structure of weathered old wood with a crescent moon carved into the door and side-by-side holes affixed with rusted white metal toilet seats. Neither Chad nor Mike were the least bit shy about demonstrating that the outhouse was perfectly functional as they took turns relieving themselves in it. It had been a long drive across Kansas from Wichita to this site on the outskirts of Plains, and nature was calling strongly to each of them. The guys' only issue with the old dilapidated crapper was a nest of wasps that sprang to life as Mike apparently did something to set them off. He hurried out of the outhouse with a yell, stuffing himself back into his pants in a bow-legged run while Chad and Gina laughed.

Zoey barely even reacted, instead fixing her gaze upon the short, broken-down set of stairs leading up to the main entry door. The rustic, frail-looking back porch seemed more like the maw of a giant, rectangular beast than the foyer to an antiquated farm home. Of course, it only looked that way to her; to everyone else, it was just a run-down old house. Zoey only felt this way because she knew of the history contained within that house... upon these grounds.

"I'm thinking it might be safer to cop a squat on the other side of the house," Gina told her.

Zoey snapped out of her daze only as Gina crossed directly in front of her view. "Watch out for snakes."

"Snakes?" she echoed with sudden alarm. "There's snakes out here?"

“Snakes, spiders, raccoons, mice, and whatever else lives out in the wild,” Chad told her as he moved to stand beside Zoey. “Mother Nature’s done a pretty good job of reclaiming this place over the years, so be careful where you’re stepping.”

“I’d be more worried about poison ivy than anything else,” Mike added. To Gina he called out, “Make sure you don’t wipe with any of the leaves!”

Gina turned with a grin, reaching into the canvas bag slung over her shoulder. She dug out a roll of toilet paper and held it up for them to see. “This ain’t my first camping trip, y’know!”

Chad readjusted the straps of his backpack before gently putting an arm around Zoey’s waist, pulling her close to his side. She looked up to him with her eyes narrowed against the glare of the bright mid-day October sun, brushing a few strands of her dyed black hair out of her face. Chad looked down to his petite girlfriend with an expression that was loving, but concerned.

“You sure you wanna do this?” he asked her in a hushed voice, apparently not wanting to be overheard by Mike. “I mean, are we even supposed to be out here at all? I don’t want to get arrested for trespassing.”

“I told you, I’ve already looked into it. This place hasn’t been lived in for almost a century,” she said. “There’s nothing but fields and farmers for ten or twenty miles around here in every direction. And Plains, Kansas isn’t exactly a metropolis. It’s not like cops are going to be cruising by here on an hourly basis or anything.”

“I know, but... well, say one of us gets bit by a snake or something?”

She allowed herself a smirk. “Y’know, you’re really hung up on snakes for some reason.”

“Worms with teeth,” he said. “Yeah, I’ve got a phobia, okay? But what if?”

“Poisonous snakes aren’t really a big thing out here. This isn’t a forest and we’re not near a river.”

“Okay, but still, if someone gets hurt...?”

“We’re not that far from Meade, okay? And Dodge City is like an hour away,” she said. “Worst-case scenario, someone busts an ankle, so we borrow some ice from the cooler and make a quick run back there. Otherwise, we’re fine.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly at her. “Then why are you so tense? This whole trip was your idea, but you look like you’re fighting the urge to hop in the car and run away.”

She frowned. “Seriously, Chad? Even if you don’t believe what I said... I do. So, can you really blame me for being a little stressed about this?”

“Then why do it? Why put yourself through this?”

“Because I have an obligation to do it,” she said, looking away from him toward the house. “I need to face my fears.”

“Zoey... babe,” he said, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head, “Zach is gone. It’s been ten years now, and you’ve had time to heal. You said so, yourself. What happened to your brother was an accident.”

“I need closure, okay?” she said. She looked up and around, watching the autumn-blazed leaves rustle and fall from their branches in the gentle breeze. “This place needs closure. It needs to be cleansed. Then I can move on. The world can move on.”

He turned her to face him more directly, lifting her chin with his finger before briefly meeting her lips with a gentle kiss. "I'm with you all the way. I love you, babe. I just want you to be happy."

"Thank you," she said softly.

"Ugh... you two," Mike groaned from a few yards away. "Can we save the make-out session for later? If we're gonna have a four-way, then I'd like to at least get a few drinks in me before I'm forced to see Chad naked."

"Dude! Seriously? A little tact?" Chad responded with a scowl.

Mike shrugged, holding up the large insulated cooler full of ice and beverages. "What? I thought half the reason we came out here was to have ourselves a freaky little Halloween party. Music, beer, boobs...?"

"The only boob here is you," Zoey grumbled under her breath.

"Look, can we get inside this place so we can set up, already? This thing is getting kinda heavy," he complained. "I told you we should've brought the one with wheels on it."

As if on cue, Gina rounded the far corner of the house, carefully stepping through a few tangles of weeds. "There's a whole window busted out on the other side on the second floor. Looks like someone boarded it up with plywood, but they left all the glass all over the ground."

Chad turned to Zoey with a raised eyebrow. "That thing you told me about the hippies...?"

"What?" she responded with a shrug. "I showed you the article. Didn't you believe me?"

"Of course I did, but..."

"Dudes! Beer! Getting heavy!" Mike cried hoisting the cooler a bit, causing the ice within to rattle.

The others started for the main entrance of the house, located near the southeast corner. It wasn't exactly the front door, since that was on the porch on the west side of the house facing the rural dirt road (hidden by an overgrown forest of weeds and shrubs). However, it was clearly the most-used entryway of the abandoned home, as evidenced by the way the front edges of the old wooden steps had been worn smooth. White and yellow paint all over the exterior of the house was flaking off steadily, yet the wood was still surprisingly resilient for the most part. Mike, of course, jokingly advised Gina not to eat the paint chips. Zoey didn't exactly hate Mike, but she would have much preferred if her friend had not invited her somewhat obnoxious boyfriend to come along.

Zoey remained behind for a few moments, watching them walk ahead of her. She seemed to be momentarily halted by something, some feeling within herself—conscience, doubt, whatever. She'd already had her doubts about this before coming out here. Now that she was at the site, she still wasn't convinced that this was something she either could or even should do. What if this accomplished nothing? What if this only made things worse? And even if she did succeed, was it something that had even truly needed to be done in the first place?

Surprisingly, the door was unlocked. However, the house had shifted upon its foundation a bit over the years in its degrading state of condition, so Chad had to shoulder the crooked-framed door open with a lot of effort. As Chad shoved and shoved at the door, Zoey again felt a swelling of something within her, a tightening

knot of uneasiness inside her belly that told her to stop, urged her to leave, begging her not to follow through with this. She resisted it, fought against it, and silently urged Chad to get the door open. She was here for a reason. She had something to do. She would not back down, not now, and certainly not after all these years. She had waited and delayed and avoided it for long enough. But she was still afraid. How could she not be? In one sense, she knew exactly what it was she was dealing with here; in another, she hadn't even the foggiest idea what she was truly facing. It wasn't so much a matter of a lack of confidence in her own abilities as a question of whether or not the potential power of what she faced might crush her.

Chad tried kicking the door a couple of times, and it gave a bit more, and only when he began to ram it with his shoulder did it seem like it might finally surrender. Becoming frustrated, not only by the door but also by Mike's continued whining about holding up the cooler full of drinks, Chad took a couple of steps back to the edge of the small porch in obvious preparation.

"Chad," Zoey warned him softly.

"I got this," he said confidently, and then he charged at the door with his shoulder.

Zoey could have sworn that, just before Chad impacted the door, it had actually begun to swing inwards on its own. Chad's shoulder blasted the door open with a loud *bang*, and he stumbled through the doorway. He barely managed to catch the doorknob as his second step inside the house met nothing but empty air. He let out a yell of alarm as he clung to the door in sudden desperation. A giant hole in the old hardwood floor lay just inside the kitchen entrance, and Chad dangled precariously over the edge of what would have been a dangerous fall into the debris inside the cellar below.

"Chad!" Zoey shrieked, reaching for him.

Gina stopped her with a firm, one-handed grab of her wrist, knowing that Zoey might fall in with him. Zoey was forced to stand by and watch helplessly, already regretting this whole thing. Chad had managed to keep one foot upon the edge of the doorstep. With his butt hanging down toward the four-foot-wide hole in the floor, it wasn't going to be easy for him to swing himself back upwards to safety. Mike finally dropped the cooler onto the porch with a *thud* and hurried forth to offer a hand, but Chad declined with wide eyes, insisting he could handle it. He tried once, twice, three times to jerk himself upright by the doorknob, not quite in danger of death but certainly at risk of falling to an unpleasant landing onto jagged bits of whatnot in the cellar.

His jerking motions to pull himself upright, combined with the weight of his body supported almost entirely by his two-handed grip upon the doorknob, proved too much for the hinges of the door anchored into soft, age-rotted wood. He was almost there, grabbing the hinge side of the door and pulling himself up. There was another crunching, creaking, crackling sound of splintering wood, and both Zoey and Gina screamed with alarm as both the door and Chad suddenly fell.

Chad spun slightly as he fell with the door, the instep of his right foot still hooked upon the edge of the doorstep. The door somehow hit the floor before he did, forming a sort of bridge over the hole with another *bang*. A large support beam running right across the middle of the hole was sufficient to sustain the

impact and support the weight of Chad and the door. The small decorative panes of yellowed glass in the door shattered with the fall, tinkling into the darkness of the cellar space below as Chad found himself looking straight through that vanishing window. For a few seconds, he simply lay there, keeping himself propped up with just the tips of his toes and his frantic grip upon the edges of the door.

He tested the edges of the hole over which he was balanced, finding it to somehow be sturdy enough to support his weight. He pushed himself up to his knees upon the door and was able to back away with a chuckle, dusting himself off.

“Hey guys,” he said, “just so you know, there’s a big freakin’ hole right here.”

“Nice work, Hercules,” Mike said. “Next time Gina locks me out of the bathroom, I’m calling you.”

Gina ignored Mike as she turned to Zoey. “You think maybe this is a sign we shouldn’t be here?”

Zoey shook her head silently. It was a sign, sure, but she would not be turned away by this. If there was any kind of sentiment that could be attached to this, it was that they were on the right track and that whatever force(s) held influence over this place were making an effort to strongly discourage them. Call it a defensive mechanism, a forceful warning. It wasn’t trying to protect them. It was trying to protect itself. It was a territorial gesture.

Leaning in carefully through the doorway, Mike pointed to a matching hole in the ceiling above where plaster had fallen down. Water had leaked down through that opening, a soft spot between support beams, it had eventually weakened the kitchen floor underneath in the same way until it had weakened the wood and caused it to partially collapse under its own weight. Though she said nothing, Zoey knew what had caused the hole in the ceiling above, long before the following water damage had caused the second hole in the kitchen floor. She had watched Zach fall right through it.

The hole was about a foot away from the door, enough of a ledge for Chad to pull the fallen door over it and cover most of the hole. He cautiously stomped and then actually jumped a couple of times upon the door, testing its strength, and he found that it made an adequately safe bridge into the kitchen, aside from the smaller hole in the door where the decorative window had been.

Chad insisted that they wait until he had explored the house briefly, checking the floor throughout the place for any more weak areas. Zoey’s arms were folded snugly under her breasts and her hands were clenched tightly into fists as she waited uneasily for Chad to finish his cursory inspection, hearing his footfalls through the first floor, clumping up the stairs, and then creaking and thumping about on the second story.

“Whoa!” she finally heard him exclaim. “Guys, you’ve gotta come see this!”

“Is it safe to come in?” Gina called out.

“Yeah, it’s safe,” he said. “There’s just that one hole up here. Otherwise the floors are fine. C’mon and check this out, you guys!”

“I hope we’re not planning on camping out up there,” Mike grumbled, hefting the cooler. “Getting this thing upstairs is gonna suck.”

Gina rolled her eyes and grabbed one handle of the cooler from him with a jerk. "Jeez! Instead of whining, maybe just try asking for help."

"My, what strong arms you have, my dear," he said with a grin, following her through the small kitchen into what was presumably a dining room.

"All the better to beat your ass with," she replied with a giggle.

Again, Zoey lagged behind. Taking that first step into the house, she could feel the fine hairs upon the back of her neck and her forearms beginning to rise, as if she had just breached the veil of a protective ward that had been placed around the building. This was bad, so very wrong, and she knew it. She would have been wise to leave well enough alone, to have instead sought a way to deal with her past and her personal issues in another way, but there was more to it than that. There was more to this than just her. She had not started this. Someone... no, something else had started it. She was but one of several that had been affected by it. But she would be the last. She would make sure of it.

Whatever energy resided in this place had to be redirected, changed, and grounded. She was among the few in the world to recognize it for what it was, the only one that believed she could properly address it, and thus she was the only one qualified to set it right. She could not simply leave it up to fate. She could not leave this to become someone else's problem somewhere later in time. Failing to act upon this would darken her soul, now and in the future, just as much as it would if she, herself, was directly responsible for whatever evils might befall others here.

The downstairs area was bland and empty, just yellow and peeling wallpaper over old plastered walls with bare wood floors and a couple of crappy old furniture pieces, too nasty and rickety-looking for anyone to even dare trying to sit upon. Nothing was obviously creepy, at least not to the others, but it was all too vividly familiar to Zoey. She knew these walls, these floors. She remembered the musty, dusty, antique smell of this place. The first floor was bad enough, but creeping up the stairs to the second story, the memories flooded back readily and strongly. Zoey had to shut her eyes and regain her composure as she reached the top of the stairs, catching the first glimpse of what Chad had so excitedly called everyone upstairs to see. She could do this. And she would do this. She had to do this.

"Check it out!" Chad said, pointing down to the floor. "How's that for Halloween creepiness?"

Zoey reluctantly walked into the empty old bedroom, the weight of the backpack over her shoulders, her black canvas bag on her left shoulder, and the kerosene lamp in her right hand. The room was fairly dark, illuminated only by the ambient light that filtered in around the edges of the plywood panel that had been nailed over the broken window and the light of Chad's tiny but bright LED flashlight. He had aimed his flashlight directly at the subject of interest upon the floor: a faint but distinct chalk outline of where a body had once lain upon the floor. In the middle of that outline, and trailing somewhat away from it by a couple of feet in two different lines, were the very dark brown stains of what could only have been blood that had soaked into the wood long, long ago.

"Oh my God!" Gina cried. "Is that for real?"

"That's where one of the hippies died, right?" Chad asked Zoey.

She stood there for a few moments before replying softly with a nod, "Yeah. That, ah... that was one of them."

"And this is where the other one took a swan-dive out the window," he said, indicating the plywood-covered window with the beam of his flashlight.

He began looking around the rest of the room with his light as Mike and Gina set the cooler down with a *thump*. Mike dug out a flashlight of his own, also examining the walls and floor of the empty bedroom.

"Dude!" he exclaimed. "There's bloodstains all over the place here! Check it out! There... over there... some more here..."

"Oh, God," Gina groaned with initial dismay. And then, suddenly sounding excited instead of repulsed, she turned to Zoey and asked, "We're doing your thing up here, right?"

"That's the plan," she responded with another subtle nod, her eyes transfixed upon the smudged and faded outline.

"We're doing her thing? What thing?" Mike asked.

"The ceremony," she replied. "Zoey's a witch, y'know."

"Not exactly."

Gina put her hands on her hips and tilted her head as she smiled to her friend. "Whad'ya mean? You know all that stuff about casting spells and whatnot, right?"

Zoey moved toward the center of the bedroom and set the kerosene lamp down upon the floor before moving toward a corner and shrugging the canvas bag and backpack from her shoulders. The leather jacket she wore was warm, but it didn't help much to keep those straps from digging into her thin shoulders.

"I've done a lot of research into Wicca and the occult," she explained, "and there's some of it I do honestly believe is legit. And, yeah, I do a few things here and there that you might call spells or ceremonies or whatever. But I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a witch. I haven't fully committed myself to the religion. I haven't gone through a self-initiation rite."

"So, then... umm... what exactly is this all about?" Mike pressed, holding his hands apart.

"Zoey wants to do a thing to get rid of all the bad vibes in this place," Gina explained brightly, also shrugging out of her backpack. "She's got some kinda ceremony or spell or something she wants to do to, like, banish all the bad juju from here. What'd you call it? A concentration?"

"Consecration."

"Constipation?"

"*Consecration*," Zoey said again a bit more firmly, frowning at Mike.

"But... if you don't really believe in it," Chad said, "then how is it supposed to work?"

Zoey twisted her lips slightly and narrowed her eyes. "What makes you think I don't believe?"

"You just said you're not a bona fide witch because you haven't officially committed yourself to it."

"Yeah, so?"

"So," Mike chimed in, "if you don't believe in that hocus-pocus stuff enough to call it your chosen religion, then why bother with this whole thing?"



Zoey closed her eyes for a moment with a sigh and turned her back to them as she knelt beside her bag, digging around inside of it. "You wouldn't understand."

"I do," Chad offered.

Zoey glanced over her shoulder at him, saying, "If you do understand, then you wouldn't question my motives."

"I don't think he's questioning your sincerity, Zoey," Gina said. "I just think... well, honestly, we're probably all a little confused as to whether or not this is going to work. I mean, what do you expect to accomplish here?"

"I need to cleanse this area. I need to redirect the negative energies that are lost and lingering here, change them, and return them to the earth," she said, taking out a box of tea candles, a canister of salt, and a gallon jug of spring water. Zoey looked up to Chad. "A better question would be, what do the rest of you hope to accomplish by being here with me?"

"I'm just here to support you," Chad said with an affectionate smile.

"Me too!" Gina replied. "And because I wanted to try a little bit of ghost hunting, while we're at it."

"Ghost hunting?" Zoey asked. "Seriously, Gina?"

"Yeah, why not?" she asked, quickly digging through her own beige canvas bag with flower designs upon it. "I brought a video camera, a still camera, a digital audio recorder, an EMF meter, a Geiger counter..."

"Jeez, woman! Letting your inner geek shine tonight, are we?" Mike laughed.

"Oh, you know you love it," she countered with a smile, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. "So, why are you here, mister?"

"Me? Hey, you're the one that talked me into coming along!" he said. "I was lured here under the pretense of us getting drunk and freaky on Halloween night in a spooky place."

"Nice," Chad said with obvious disdain. "Very subtle."

"Hey, I'm just being honest."

"While you're being *honest*," Zoey said, pulling out a large kukri-style machete in a black canvas sheath, "how about you make an *honest* effort to go around the perimeter of this house and clear a path through all those weeds and stuff?"

Mike's shoulders slumped. "Seriously? Why am I getting stuck with all the grunt work?"

"Because you complain the most," she responded with a smile. "If it'll make you feel better, I'll serve you a nice cold beer when you're done."

Mike walked over and she unsheathed the long, wicked-looking machete, handing it to him grip-first. He accepted it with a mischievous grin.

"Say," he said in a more hushed voice, "I heard that some witches like to do their ceremonies naked. Is that true?"

"Some witches, but not all."

"So, ah... you gonna be getting naked tonight?"

She smirked at him. "Maybe. What if I said all of us need to be naked for the spell to work?"

"Hey, all of us getting naked works for me."

"Oh? Even Chad?"

"Well... maybe not so much him."

"Oh, c'mon, Mike! It's just nudity. What's wrong with that?"

"I'm just not into dudes," he said. "Seeing you and Gina, though ... that'd be nice."

"Why? Nudity isn't necessarily sexual." Zoey narrowed her eyes at him. "Wait. Did Gina promise you that something was going to happen between all of us tonight?"

He shrugged, still smiling. "Not in so many words, but hey... after a few drinks, people start getting comfortable, inhibitions start going away, and... y'know... things can happen."

"Uh-huh... right," she said, rolling her eyes before turning away from him. "Hey, Gina? You mind if I turn your boyfriend into a toad?"

"Sure, go for it!"

"You can do that?" Mike asked in a hushed voice, raising an eyebrow.

Zoey took out one of the final items from her bag and held it up so he could see it: a large and very sharp knife with a faux bone handle and a brass hilt. There was nothing particularly special about the knife's construction or appearance, as it was just a cheap hunting knife she had bought at a sporting goods store. Like most of her magickal items, its usefulness was not determined by its looks or its origin but rather by her intent and how she used it.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," she said, watching his eyes fixate upon the big knife, "but I do know that I can make you into a eunuch if you don't behave yourself."

"Oh." Mike backed away with a nervous grin. "I think I'll get to cutting them weeds down now."

"Good boy."

While Zoey went about the process of setting up the room in preparation of the ceremony, Gina busied herself with arranging her electronic doohickeys. At Zoey's insistence, she set up the video camera on its small tripod in the hallway just outside of the bedroom, partly because she didn't want it to be in the way of anything, and partly because she suspected that electronics might have an adverse effect upon the energies she would be working with in the ceremony. She permitted Gina to take her EMF and Geiger counter readings beforehand, and to make her initial EVP recording attempts, but she advised her that once the ceremony had begun, those devices would also have to be moved outside of the room.

She wanted this to go as smoothly and as perfectly as possible. It wasn't an especially complex process or a difficult one, but she had a distinct feeling that she would only get one shot at this. For one, she doubted that her companions would agree to going through this whole procedure if Zoey felt that it had been completely ineffective. And secondly, if things went wrong in the way that she worried they might, then it was impossible to know just what might happen—maybe something bad, maybe nothing at all. She had never worked with energy this serious before, never dabbled in magick dealings of this scale. She was truly dealing with a lot of unknowns here. But it wasn't like she could consult with anyone else on the matter. People were generally skeptical enough about the occult in general, but to ask if a consecration ceremony by a not-quite witch would be enough to dispel an evil entity or force that seemed to inhabit a particular place? That was just asking to get locked up in a mental institution.

Being honest with herself, she was fully aware that she was playing with fire, but she was foolhardy enough to still hope that it couldn't possibly result in anything too terrible. She had beliefs, but they didn't exactly equate to true faith. As such, if they went through with this and it failed to nullify the forces that she believed were there, then... well, no harm, no foul, right? Or had that been what those hippies had been thinking before meeting their violent ends? Either way, the only thing for certain was her resolve to see that this was done. If this was no more effective than saying "bless you" after someone's sneeze, then so be it. But if things truly went sideways...

Mike returned from his "mission" outside, declaring that he had successfully hacked a path around the outside of the house and complaining that he was probably going to develop a rash from the poison ivy that he'd encountered. With the light from outside already fading as the sun set, Zoey lit the kerosene lantern with a long-stemmed butane lighter, and she carefully ensured that it was exactly in the center of the square room. She then carefully arranged four of the tea candles around the lantern, making it a centerpiece, and lit those as well. Chad was respectfully quiet and observant throughout this process. Mike was grumbling that he wanted a beer, but Zoey asked him to wait until the ceremony was underway, as there was a point at which it was considered to be appropriate. Gina continued snapping photos until Zoey indicated that they were ready to begin, at which point she then laid the camera underneath the tripod of the video camera in the hallway, switching that on instead.

Zoey also asked that everyone power off their cell phones, feeling more concerned about those devices than the others she'd asked Gina to set outside of the room. Cell phones, after all, involved sending and receiving electronic signals over the air. Though it was probably a bit of pseudo-science, or maybe she was just over-thinking things, she believed that wireless electronics would have an even greater potential for interference because of how they may affect the energies which she intended to summon and redirect. She didn't bother to explain any of this to them, of course. They wouldn't have understood and, most likely, would have just rolled their eyes at any such explanation.

She handed each of them small cue cards with handwritten instructions on what they were to do to assist her in casting a circle and calling the Four Corners. She had made their involvement as simple as possible, indicating that all they needed to do was recite the words on their cue cards as she pointed to them, and to repeat them over and over with increasing volume until she grounded the cone of power with her athame ("ath-ah-may"), the ceremonial knife she had brought out. She briefly considered kicking off her knee-high boots and socks, knowing that she would feel more connected to the site with bare feet, but decided against it. They would be walking outside soon, and Gina had earlier warned that there was broken glass nearby.

Lastly, she shrugged out of her leather jacket and slipped on the thin black polyester robe she had stowed her in backpack. Her theory was not that black was a negative color, but rather that it could absorb negativity. While this robe was actually a costume piece she had picked up from the seasonal Halloween section of a department store, she believed that it didn't matter so much whether or not the item was a genuine religious relic as much as how it was used. Besides,

considering that this cloak was supposed to absorb negativity, she fully intended to burn it immediately after the ceremony, just in case any residual energy or influence might have tainted the item. The fire would purify it as it obliterated the material, and she would then neutralize the ashes as she extinguished them by sprinkling the remains with salt water.

Zoey unscrewed the cap on the jug of water, poured a large measure of salt into it, put the cap back on, and then shook it vigorously to help dissolve the salt. She then took one of the four shot glasses they had brought along and set it on the floor beside the jug. Directing everyone to settle into their places near each of the four walls and directly in front of the four tea candles she had lit, representing north, east, south, and west, she handed each of them a stick of jasmine incense. She instructed them to light the incense while she quickly and quietly blessed the salt water that she had just mixed. Once all four sticks of incense were lit, she then asked them to follow her outside to walk deodosil (clockwise) around the house three times.

“Hey, Zoey?” Gina soon asked as they made their way downstairs. “Is it okay to talk?”

“Sure, until we finish casting the circle.”

“Cool. So, how’s about telling us a spooky Halloween story?”

“You mean a *sam-hain* story?” she asked with a smirk, deliberately mispronouncing Samhain (“sah-ween”).

“Halloween, Samhain, whatever. Seriously, what’s the story behind this place? I mean... besides what happened with Zach?”

“Yeah, like, what’s the deal with the chalk outline and the bloodstains?” she asked. “That wasn’t, like... where your brother died, was it?”

“No,” she replied solemnly. “Zach was killed on the road outside of here.”

And so, as they walked carefully around the house with incense and flashlights in hand, Zoey carried her stick of incense in her teeth like a cigarette, tucked the jug of saltwater under one arm, and used a shot glass in her other hand to splash a bit of it around here and there during their rounds. As they walked, she told them what she knew of the history of this site, both what she had learned through her research and what she had experienced firsthand. Her intention was not to disturb them with scary stories as Gina had suggested, of course, but rather to give them a clearer idea as to why she truly believed that they were walking on darkly tainted grounds.

Obviously, it had once been a farmhouse, built and occupied by a German immigrant family—a man, his wife, and their son and daughter—back in the very early 1900’s. When the Great Depression hit and western Kansas became the scene of what was called the Dust Bowl, a great drought and terrible dust storms had claimed all of their crops for season after season. As their finances failed and as lenders threatened to foreclose upon their land, the farmer supposedly had a complete mental breakdown. He set fire to the barn and tool shed, then went into the house and stabbed his wife to death with a field knife, threw his daughter out of the second-story window, and bludgeoned his son to death in the cellar with a hammer. A neighbor saw the smoke from the burning barn and shed, so he came rushing to the farm in his truck. The farmer saw him approaching, hid in the field nearby until he was close, and then threw himself in front of the truck, which

crushed him to death under its wheels. It was apparently not the first nor the only time that such a thing had happened during that time period, so it was soon forgotten.

Nearly forty years later, a few flower children found the house and decided to set up shop in there with the intention of using the site as a dope-smoking hangout. No one was completely certain what happened, but a deputy later came across the wreckage of their Volkswagen van just a few hundred feet away from the house, the driver killed during an unexplainable rollover accident. One of the hippies was found dead outside of the house, apparently having jumped head-first through the second-story bedroom window. Another was found dead in the cellar, beaten to death with a piece of wood. The third, a female, was found to have been stabbed to death upstairs in the same bedroom from which the other had jumped to his death. Nobody seemed to have made any direct connection between these mysterious deaths and the murder-suicide massacre perpetrated by the farmer, but the story did briefly make headlines. The authorities' theory was that the hippie that died in the van had "freaked out on a bad trip" and killed the others before attempting to flee and accidentally wrecking the van during his getaway.

Lastly, almost exactly ten years prior to this particular Halloween night, Zoey and her brother Zach had deliberately sought out the farm house, having read about the deaths in a random magazine article and then learned a few stories from relatives and friends that lived in the area. They had made a road trip out of it and had planned to stay the night there, sort of as a dare to each other. Whoever chickened out and wanted to leave first would lose and owed the winner one hundred dollars. Incidentally, Zach had also brought along a bottle of whiskey. The last thing that Zoey remembered with absolute clarity was sitting in this same bedroom, passing the whiskey bottle back and forth, and telling each other scary stories to try to work upon one others' nerves. Her next lucid memory was waking up in the wreckage of their car, which Zach had driven straight into a fence at the edge of the farm property, and finding that part of a broken-off fencepost that had speared straight through the windshield and into Zach's face. Zoey had been seriously injured—she hadn't been wearing her seat belt at the time of the crash—but she had somehow managed to limp over a mile or so down that dirt road until she came upon a passing vehicle that she managed to flag down.

To that day, she still had a couple of small but visible scars upon her cheek and temple from where the windshield had cut her, and her neck and knee sometimes ached sharply at odd times. Between the time when she had blacked out in the house and the time when she had awoken in the car, there were only vague glimpses, things that she had always doubted were entirely real or accurate. She remembered Zach falling through the floor of the upper story and landing in the kitchen. She remembered being stuck in the cellar. She thought that she recalled there being a little kid in there, or at least she remembered hearing one crying, or perhaps that was only her own sobbing that she'd heard. And she remembered a formless black mist, one that did not simply hang in the air but instead moved with purpose, if not a sort of intelligence. It was all very vague, though, and many of these "memories" usually only came to her when she had nightmares about that day. She couldn't be certain how much of it had been real and how much had been fabricated within her sleep later on.

Oddly, it seemed almost as though the tree branches and weeds that Mike had cut back with the machete were moving back into place, becoming more and more obstructive with every time they walked around the house. As they made their third and final lap around the house, also just as Zoey had finished her tale, the branch of a thorny vine or tree snagged itself upon the hood of her cloak. It surprised her at first, and during her hurried efforts to disentangle herself from it, she received a few scratches upon her hands, forearms, and the back of her neck, all of which burned with an unusual intensity. Aloud, she said that it was probably just the wind that had caused the branch to move out of place, although she honestly wasn't sure whether that verbal reassurance was for anyone else's sake but her own. Realistically, she knew that it wasn't that simple, as there really wasn't much of a breeze to speak of at that point in the evening, but she didn't want to alarm the others with her own possibly foolish suspicions and fears. Just the same, she flicked a shot glass full of saltwater directly at the offending branch.

As they made their way back into the house, things had become very, very dark, and so it was a bit more unnerving to cross the threshold of the kitchen and pass over the haphazardly covered hole in the floor. For some reason, even though Chad had made a good effort to check the floors for any other weak spots, Zoey half expected the wood to give way underfoot and plunge her into the cellar. As it was, the house just didn't look or feel sturdy in any way at all, likely so bad that it would have been condemned if it had been located in a city. The fact that Zoey was increasingly feeling as if their presence and her efforts were agitating the forces or entity residing there only added to her concern. She scattered a shot glass full of saltwater across the opening in the floor, just for good measure. If there was any negativity lingering there, she hoped that it would help to neutralize it.

When they returned to the bedroom at last, Zoey took her position in the north side of the room while Chad, Gina and Mike sat cross-legged at their positions of east, south, and west, respectively. She laid the stick of incense across the tin cup of the tea candle in front of her, and the other three followed her example. She then picked up her athame and began the process of calling the Four Corners, gesturing with the blade toward each of her companions as she cued them to begin reciting their part of the incantation. She did this in a crisscross pattern—north, south, east, west—and she increased the pace with every revolution of the calling. For the most part, the others did quite well, following her direction and similarly raising the volume of their voices as they began to all chant together in unison... well, aside from Mike, who sounded distinctly insincere and disinterested with his words as he called the Watchtower of the West. As their pace and volume reached a crescendo, Zoey arose to stand, holding the athame high overhead and moving to stand near the old outlined bloodstain upon the floor. She turned the athame over, pointing it downward, and took it into both hands in preparation to strike.

"So mote it be!" she cried at the apex of the chant, then drove the blade into the floor at the center of the bloodstain.

Gina let out a sharp yelp of surprise and jumped back, and a moment later, both Chad and Mike chuckled with amusement at her reaction. Zoey wasn't laughing at all. She remained right where she knelt, looking at the athame with stunned disbelief. It took a few moments, but the others finally noticed why she

was staring at the ceremonial knife with such a wide-eyed look. In that single thrust, she had somehow managed to bury the full length of that blade all the way to the hilt in the floor.

“Holy crap!” Mike laughed. “That’s some super witchy strength you’ve got there, Zoey.”

“I... I didn’t even do it that hard,” she said, still staring at it with disbelief. “I guess the wood is pretty weak here.”

“Great,” Mike said, “so the weight of all four of us sitting up here is probably going to make this rickety old house collapse or something now, huh?”

“Relax, we’re fine,” Chad grumbled, getting up and moving over next to Zoey. “You okay?”

It took her a moment to find her voice again, but she finally blinked away her surprise and forced herself to smile to him. “Yeah. I’m good.”

Gina rubbed her hands together nervously as she asked, “So, umm... was that it? Did it work?”

“We’re not done yet,” she said as she got up, dusting off her knees, “but that was the hard part of the ritual. Now, we get to the cakes and ale part.”

“Hallelujah! Booze and munchies!” Mike cried out with relieved delight, hopping up and immediately heading over to the cooler. He jerked open the top and began rummaging through the ice inside. “Who else is ready for a shot and a beer?”

Now that the circle had been cast, intended to shelter them from malicious spirits, they began distributing some spirits of their own—those of the alcoholic sort. Cake seemed inappropriate for the occasion, since it didn't exactly go well with beer and whiskey, but a large bag of mountain trail mix that they passed around worked well enough.

“So, what's next?” Gina asked as she watched Zoey unwrap and unscrew the cap on the brand new bottle of Kentucky bourbon.

“Nothing too difficult,” she said, beginning to pour a measure into each of the four shot glasses she had lined up. “Right now, we're each going to take turns expressing our wishes for the outcome of this ceremony. I'll go first.” Finished pouring the shots, she set the bottle down and picked up one of the shot glasses. “It is my sincere hope that, when we close this circle tonight, we will finally be putting to rest whatever restless spirits, forces, or energy that have been trapped within this space in the world for so long. I hope that, after this night, there will only be happiness and harmony to be found here in this place, and among one another.”

And with that, she held up her shot glass and gave a small salute before knocking it back in a quick gulp. The ice-cold whiskey went down smoothly at first, but then the alcohol of it began to burn her throat slightly after a couple of seconds. It was the first time since she'd last been here with Zach that she had ever so much as tasted whiskey, having deliberately avoided it entirely over the years by opting for other alternatives. Here and now, however, it only made sense. It wasn't a taste that she loved, but it did immediately bring back memories.

Mike immediately moved to pick up his shot glass, as did Gina, but Zoey quickly held out a hand to stop them. “Not yet. One at a time. Who wants to go next?”

“Ooh, me!” Gina volunteered excitedly, raising her little glass in a toast. “Here's to, ah ... here's to hoping that whatever bad juju is here will go away and never come back. Oh, and also to good times with good friends.”

She downed her shot, wincing at the intensity of it and coughing a bit as she stifled a giggle. Mike picked up his shot glass, but hesitated as he appeared to be struggling to think of something to say. Chad beat him to it, picking up the last shot glass and holding it aloft as he met Zoey's eyes.

“It is my sincere hope that, as Zoey said, we will put the past in the past, that we will settle whatever bad karma is floating around here, and that Zoey will finally be able to find peace and a sense of closure after losing her brother.”

Zoey smiled and silently mouthed a “thank you” to her boyfriend as he gulped his drink easily. Apparently feeling a bit of bravado, now that he finally had an idea, Mike puffed out his chest with a grin as he held up the fourth and final drink.

“Here's to you, Zoey, and I hope that this ritual does... whatever it is you said you wanted it to do,” he offered somewhat awkwardly. “Oh, and... it is my sincere hope that, ah... everyone here gets laid soon.” Zoey rolled her eyes and Gina punched his shoulder with a giggle. “Oh yeah, and cheers to the spooks and specters in this place. Ooga-booga!”

Mike sloppily downed his whiskey, dribbling a bit past the corner of his mouth and cursing slightly as he wiped it off his cheek. Zoey frowned. He wasn't taking this seriously at all. She should have insisted upon bringing someone else. Why had Gina brought this clown along? And why was she dating him, anyway? What did she see in the jerk? Sure, he was okay looking, but didn't she get sick of the way he acted all of the time? Or did he act differently when he was alone with her? Either way, Zoey's new concern was how Mike's involvement in this ritual might affect its outcome, whether he might lessen its effectiveness or, worse still, if he might twist the effect of the ceremony into something that amplified the negativity rather than neutralizing it.

Her concern must have shown plainly upon her face as Chad gave her a sympathetic look. He gestured with his eyes only toward Mike, smirked awkwardly, and shrugged one shoulder as if to say, “Whatever, don't mind him.” Perhaps Zoey was just spoiled by having a great guy in her life. She had been with Chad for over six months at that point. She could totally see herself spending another six with him, maybe even longer. He didn't seem too deeply interested in her somewhat eccentric beliefs and practices, but he was at least respectful, and whatever views he had on the matter he had always kept to himself. Gina, on the other hand, was a wonderful and very close friend, but she had always expressed a great deal of skepticism and bewilderment as to how Zoey could believe in any of this stuff she incorrectly labeled as “voodoo.” Still, like Chad, Gina was decent enough not to mock her for it. She didn't get it, but she didn't need to, and that was fine.

There was a bit of chatting, joking, and discussion as beers were cracked open and a few more shots were poured. The mood among the four of them became much more relaxed and at ease, surely in no small part due to the alcohol but also due to the fact that nothing immediately appeared to be happening. No ghostly apparitions had appeared, no mysterious or threatening sounds had been heard,



no objects had been levitated, and nobody exhibited any signs of demonic possession. Zoey honestly hadn't been entirely sure what to expect, herself, but as far as she was concerned, experiencing nothing at all was preferable to (again) being confronted with a bunch of otherworldly and terrifying events.

By the time she got around to thanking the Powers That Be for their presence and assistance, bidding them farewell as she began to close the circle, the alcohol was already beginning to really take an effect upon her. Having sat for a few minutes after imbibing three shots and a beer, she found herself wobbling a bit as she walked widdershins (counter-clockwise) around the room with what remained of the four sticks of incense that still burned. Although she felt a bit more relaxed, she still didn't feel like this was going as well as it could have. Now, it wasn't a matter of Mike causing problems but rather herself. She was tripping over her own feet and fumbling over her words.

This isn't going to work, she thought to herself. This is only going to make things worse.

She did her best to try to force that thought out of her head, instead focusing upon closing the circle. When she finished her final walk around the room, she practically crumpled to the floor, not just from a bit of intoxication but also from what felt like a sudden wave of fatigue. She felt utterly drained now. For whatever reason, this ritual was taking an awful lot out of her. Perhaps it was because she was so emotionally agitated. Maybe the magick of this ceremony needed to draw a measure of energy directly from her, being that she was the orchestrator of this circle. When she unscrewed the cap of the jug full of saltwater, she shoved the four sticks of incense into the top and slapped her hand over the opening, waiting for a few moments before replacing the cap and leaving the remains of the incense to float around within the jug. The water, she noted with both fascination and a small bit of unease, quickly clouded and darkened to an ugly gunmetal-gray color.

It finally dawned upon her why she likely felt so drained and weary. The cloak! It was absorbing negative energy from all around her, perhaps even from within her. Either the negativity was adding a sort of tangible weight to the cloak, or perhaps having that negatively-charged garment wrapped around herself was having an effect upon her aura. Either way, she immediately felt the need to be free of it, now that the circle was closed. She stripped off the cloak and threw it down into a heap, covering the athame that was still buried to the hilt in the floor. Almost instantly, she felt relieved... and suddenly very, very cold.

"Are you all right?" Chad asked, sensing her unease.

"Yeah. I'm good," she said. Zoey forced a smile and turned toward the others. "It's over now. You can all relax. We did it."

"We did? You mean it worked?" Gina asked, looking around the room.

Zoey shrugged. "I can't say for sure that we've fixed this place for good, but we definitely accomplished something. I could feel it."

"The only thing I feel," Mike said, reaching into the cooler, "is the need for another beer. Anyone else?"

Chad and Gina both raised their hands, and Mike tossed them each a can before taking another one out for himself. Feeling the worsening cold that was likely drifting in from the October night air outside, Zoey picked up her jacket from the floor and slipped it on. She was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and knee-high boots,

so she wasn't exactly dressed for summer, but she also probably hadn't worn enough to get through the night comfortably. There were sleeping bags in the SUV outside, however. It hadn't been officially decided yet whether they would actually spend the entire night here, or if they would sleep outside while crammed inside the Explorer, or if they would simply head back to Meade and get a motel room. And, of course, there was Chad. She was looking forward to snuggling up with him soon... and probably more. Gina was certainly wasting no time, already starting to make out with Mike as soon as he sat down next to her again.

Zoey dug inside of her jacket pockets and withdrew a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, gesturing out toward the hallway as Chad met her gaze. "Gonna go burn one."

"Want some company?"

"I'm okay," she insisted with a smile, this time a genuine one. "I think I'll just walk around the place three more times to be sure the energy's wound down. You know... just for good measure." He stared at her for a moment or two. "What?"

"You really did feel something?" he asked.

"Yeah." She smiled and nodded. "Thank you again for coming out here with me and doing this. It really means a lot to me."

"Anytime."

"And you too, Gina," she added. Her friend gave a little wave of her fingers as she kept her lips pressed against her boyfriend's mouth. Mike held up a hand as if to seek recognition. "Yes, and you too, Mike."

He gave her a thumbs-up and then his hand went to Gina's chest. Zoey rolled her eyes and turned to walk outside, carefully stepping over Gina's equipment. She noticed the red light on the video camera was still blinking, indicating that it was still recording. She wasn't sure if it was Gina's intention to leave it running or not. Was she only interested in hoping to catch a glimpse of ghostly events? Or was she also interested in recording herself getting her freak on with Mike? Whatever. It wasn't her concern, and it wasn't her equipment. She ignored the fluctuating numbers on the EMF meter and the bouncing needle of the Geiger counter on the floor as she clicked on her small flashlight and made her way downstairs and outside.

Strangely, the night air seemed almost bitterly cold when she stepped over the hole in the kitchen floor and out into the dark night. But after she had lit her cigarette, pocketed the pack and lighter, and begun to walk counter-clockwise around the house, she found that the air was now less cool on the other side of the house. It was an odd thing, a very significant change in temperature between one place and the next. She supposed that perhaps there was some sort of draft coming up through the cellar, which likely was a lot cooler than the rest of the interior of the house, and maybe that accounted for part of it. Yet even stranger still was the fact that, as she first rounded the north and then the west sides of the house, the air outside went from being cool to room-temperature and then, as she rounded the southwest corner, it was suddenly very warm, almost hot. And at the same time, she became aware of a just how brightly-lit the scene had just become.

She had just taken a heavy drag from her cigarette when she halted in her tracks, seeing a strange but intense orange glow coming from the southeast corner

of the property. Earlier, when they had first arrived, there had been nothing but the overgrown and barely visible remains of what had once been the tool shed that the farmer had set on fire during his homicidal meltdown. Now, as she quickened in her pace slightly to look past the overgrown trees, weeds, and shrubs, she saw that there appeared to be something there now. As soon as she saw it, halting in her tracks abruptly and standing just next to the doors leading down into the cellar, she felt something inside of her chest draw tight and hard and cold. She stared at it, stared and tried to convince herself it wasn't there. She pinched herself, then looked again. She slapped herself, then looked. And she very nearly moved to touch the ash of her cigarette to her palm, still not believing in what she saw. Then that sight was joined by a second one, something even more horrifying than the first.

And in that moment, she knew that they had, indeed, accomplished something that night with the ceremony. Unfortunately, whatever they had accomplished was clearly something unintended... something very, very, bad.

She turned away from the sight of the tool shed—now standing, now complete, and now burning brightly with a freshly-lit fire inside—and her wide eyes darted over to the second flash of bright orange light that flared into being with an audible *whoosh*. She trudged forward slowly, awkwardly, as if her boots were now suddenly filled with lead, nearing the porch by the door leading into the kitchen. There it was, the barn that had once been nothing but a shapeless pile of burnt and weathered and weed-consumed wood and rusty steel things. It was there. It was standing whole. It was now beginning to burn again, flames quickly climbing its walls and beams to devour it hungrily.

And there he was, too. She saw him, instantly knowing who and what he was as soon as she saw him, even though she had never once seen his image before in her life. She heard him, too, heard him shouting over the swelling roar and crackle of the fires. He was yelling what sounded initially like angry gibberish, but what she soon began to realize was German. She had no idea what he was saying, only that his body language clearly expressed an extreme amount of rage and panic, flailing his arms about and punching at the air. He picked up what looked like a large can of something and then pitched it into the burning barn, swearing incoherently and hatefully for a few moments before the can burst within the barn with a deep poof sound.

And then he turned around.

What she saw as the farmer faced her was truly the stuff of nightmares. There was no gore, no blood. And there were also no eyes. He was middle-aged, tall, slender, dressed in overalls, wearing a button-up shirt underneath with its sleeves rolled up past his elbows. He had dark, short hair that was a wild, tangled mess, and a thick mustache that flared out on either side of his thin-lipped mouth. But his eyes... his eyes just weren't there. They hadn't been plucked out, nor were they just missing. His entire eye sockets were just gaping black holes of infinite blackness, twin abysses that stared at her from across the barnyard. There was a sort of blurriness, not just around those empty holes that he had for eyes, but over the entire sight of him. He looked sort of gray all over, like an animated image from a black-and-white movie, and he looked smudged, as if someone had taken a very large thumb, pressed it over the sight of him, and smeared him slightly like a

drawing made of charcoal upon paper. The sight of him might not have been terribly clear, but his voice was as real as the crackle and roar of the fires that raged behind him and the sound of Zoey's shuddering breath escaping her lips as she exhaled a plume of cigarette smoke.

He pointed at her. He yelled something. Zoey stood in place, transfixed by the sight of the farmer and the start of his rampage. He started walking in her direction. She tried to force herself to move, but her feet felt as though they had frozen into place upon the ground. He shouted more angrily at her, spouting off a long, angry line of something in German that sounded accusing, outraged, and wholly unpleasant. He kept advancing in her direction. And then he reached for something at his waist. He pulled it out with a jerk, holding it at his side. While the rest of him was a grayed blur of sorts, the thing he held was sharply in focus and glinted brightly in the glare of the fires. It was a well-worn field knife.

Zoey finally began to run. She let her cigarette fall from her fingers as she dashed for the door leading into the house, screaming for Chad and Gina. She stumbled slightly as she ascended the stairs. Her boots may have been made for walking, but definitely not for running. She glanced back one last time over her shoulder toward the farmer. He was walking directly for her with long, fast strides, holding that knife out by his side with every intention in the world of burying it within her torso just like she had shoved her athame into the floor upstairs.

The turn to look back had been a mistake, of course. It wasn't a mistake that she could have foreseen, of course. She had counted upon the door being there, still laid across the hole in the kitchen floor. She had not, however, expected to find herself stepping into empty space, her first step into the house meeting nothing but dark air and pitching her forward. She gasped sharply with surprise, and she struck the far edge of the broad hole with her upper body, slamming her torso against the very hard and jagged edge of the gaping chasm as she fell down into it. In reality, the fall was very brief, perhaps not even ten feet, but it seemed to last for ages, long enough for her to let out just a brief scream that was cut abruptly short as she landed upon her back, fully knocking the wind from her. Her legs slammed down after her back and side took the brunt of the impact, making a surprising splash as she realized she'd fallen into some shallow pool of water, and she instantly felt a sharp pain in her right ankle. The agony was intense enough that she wanted to shriek loudly with all that she had, but her lungs seemed momentarily paralyzed by the fall.

Immediately, she became aware of the cold, chilling wetness that surrounded her as she stared up at the hole in the kitchen floor through which she had fallen. The light of the fires outside filtered in through the open doorway, illuminating the interior of the house with an eerie reddish-orange glow, while the cellar was very, very dimly lit by the flashlight that she had dropped somewhere nearby in the water during her fall. Zoey lay there for several seconds, just struggling to draw her first breath. It took a lot of work, but at last she was able to draw one half-breath, gagging and coughing until she was able to then draw another more complete breath, exhaling it with a pained groan.

As she lay there, still unable to move for the moment, she watched as she saw the farmer step into view. He didn't simply step over the hole. He actually stepped into the hole, his foot landing upon nothing and resounding with the same *thud* as

if he'd just stepped upon solid wood. She was looking up at him as if she were a fish looking up at a glass-bottomed boat. And just as quickly as he'd appeared, he then moved out of view with his next step, the last visible part of him being that awful, vividly real-looking knife that he still held at his side.

"Oh God," she croaked, finding her voice at last with increasing intensity. "Chad. Chad! *Chad!* Gina! Chad! He's coming! He's... ow!"

As she tried to sit up, her warning was cut off by a need to scream in pain when something within her ankle felt like it was grating upon her bones. She flopped back down and her legs splashed within the stagnant, foul-smelling waters of the lightly flooded cellar. She turned and found the glow of her flashlight, her eyes adjusting somewhat to the darkness enough that she could spot its muted glow under the surface of the filthy water. It was just barely out of reach, but a bit of squirming soon brought her fingertips around it. Thankfully, the light was waterproof, and so it was still shining brightly enough when she grasped it that she was able to shine it down at her ankle and see just how badly she had been hurt by the fall.

She had expected to find her ankle twisted at an odd and ugly angle. In a way, what she saw was better than that, but also somehow more horrifying. A broken-off board with several nails on the end, apparently a piece of the collapsed floor above, had more or less impaled her ankle laterally as she'd fallen upon it, the rusty old nails having been thrust right through her boot, jeans, sock, and even the bones of her ankle. Already, she could feel her boot filling up with a wetness. She hoped that it was just the water of the cellar and not just blood... and in the same moment, she then immediately worried about that nasty water causing a horrible infection, not to mention the risk of tetanus from the rusty nails. But if that farmer came back and found her, then none of that would matter, anyway.

She reached for the remains of the board that was now nailed to her ankle. Her first instinct was to yank it out. That proved to be a bit more of a task than she had expected, as the rotten old board easily crumbled within her grasp. She hurriedly tossed away piece after piece of the board as she broke each chunk off, trying desperately to get it out of her before the initial shock of her injury wore off and the real pain of the wound began to settle in.

"Zoey?"

The sound of Chad's voice was enough to make her halt in her efforts and look up. The beam of another flashlight was shining down through the open hole in the floor that had delivered her to the cellar. After a moment, when the light wasn't shining directly at her face, she saw Chad standing over the hole and looking down.

"Oh God, Zoey! Are you all right?"

Wait, how was he able to be standing there in that moment? The farmer had just walked by, hadn't he? Surely, he would have encountered Chad on his way through the house. Or had the farmer doubled back and walked outside again? Had the farmer simply been a repeating image, a spectral image that was like a stain in time and not an intelligent entity? Maybe the image had lost its energy and faded out of existence already? And where the hell had the door gone?

"Did you fall down there?"

“No, I rode a friggin' broomstick! What does it look like?” she barked thoughtlessly through her clenched teeth. She was not angry with Chad, but rather at the remains of the board she was still attempting to extract from her ankle. With a sickening, crunching and scraping sensation, she finally grabbed a solid bit of the wood and felt the nails beginning to be pulled free of her limb. “Oh God... come on... there!”

She tossed aside the offending piece of debris as Chad cursed softly in response to the sight of her injury. “What happened to the door we had covering the hole?”

“Don't know, don't care!” she responded, still wincing at the pain in her ankle. “Just get me the hell out of here!”

“Okay, just let me...”

Chad's words halted suddenly at the sound of a blood-curdling scream from somewhere above. Without a doubt, it was Gina. She screamed, over and over again, in short, pained and panicky shrieks that devolved into something like sobbing, then wailing, and finally... gurgling.

“Gina!” Zoey and Chad both cried, and Chad disappeared from view, his feet thudding across the floor as he hurried to her aid.

Zoey didn't fault him for leaving her in the cellar. Her only crisis was finding a way out of the cellar and then cleaning and dressing her wounded ankle. Gina, however... oh God, poor Gina sounded as though she were being torn to shreds by someone or something. And then Mike began to scream as well, not exactly in pain so much as just sheer terror, the full-on sort of screech that a grown man would only make if his insides were being torn out, or if he was reacting to what was presumably the most unholy of all possible sights in this mortal realm.

Realizing that it was up to her now to manage her own escape from this place, and possibly to even try to help her friends upstairs, Zoey finally managed to sit upright and shine the flashlight at her surroundings. It was a tangled mess of random junk, very thick spider webs, and... and...

“Oh God, no,” she murmured. And then, “Oh, blessed Goddess, no.”

Her flashlight found and then fixated upon the sight of a boy cowering in a far corner of the cellar. He was very young, perhaps only four or five, and his hair was a tousled mop of blonde. His clothes were filthy and worn, and clearly of a design that was nothing even remotely modern. He had shoved himself down into a corner underneath a heavy wooden work bench, his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around them, burying his face against his knees. Like the farmer, he was a grayed, blurry smudge of an image. But similarly, she could very clearly hear him crying and sniffing, seeing his little body heaving with the sobs that he struggled to muffle. The little boy looked and acted every bit as terrified as Mike sounded from upstairs... up until Mike's scream suddenly became very intense for an instant, then rapidly faded and suddenly cut off all at once.

“This isn't happening. I'm not seeing this,” Zoey told herself even as she stared at the boy. “None of this is real. I'm freaking out. This isn't real. I'm having a nightmare. I passed out, and I'm just...”

A loud banging sounded from her left, wood doors clattering open partially and then smacking shut loudly, over and over again. She shined her light in the direction of the noise, finding that it was coming from the stairway leading up to,

she assumed, the outside entrance to the cellar. She wasn't sure if there was another way to get into the cellar from within the house or not, but if there was, it was most likely behind that impassible wall of junk and debris to her right. There was no way she could somehow spring up and pull herself back up out of the cellar through the hole in the kitchen floor. She could never have jumped that high, even without a wounded ankle. In short, she was trapped. The only thing she could hope to do was resist... and to pray.

Momentarily ignoring the growing pain in her right ankle, Zoey forced herself upright to feet, limp-hopping over toward the stairs with loud, messy splashes of the disgusting water. She hopped up a few of the stairs and then clumsily banged her head upon the underside of the doors, feeling her teeth clack shut painfully from the impact. She took one brief glimpse with a wave of the flashlight at the doors, saw that there were handles on the inside, and she promptly grabbed hold of them, holding onto the doors and pulling with everything she had. She felt someone on the other side of the doors pulling upon them with a great deal of strength. Zoey leaned back with all of her weight—not much, considering that she was actually rather petite—and the force on the other side actually lifted the doors as well as the weight of her body with what seemed to be relative ease.

“Help! Chad! He's here! He's trying to get in the cellar!” she yelled, clinging to the doors desperately and feeling the grip of her right hand beginning to slip, as she was also using that hand to attempt to hold the flashlight. The force, presumably the farmer, jerked hard upon the doors another time, and Zoey heard things beginning to creak and crack. “Hurry! Oh God, please!”

With one final, sudden, and violent movement, the door in her right hand was yanked from her grasp, causing her to fall backward and tumble down the short but very hard set of concrete stairs. She splashed back into the bone-chillingly cold and foul-smelling water, and she heard the boy's crying suddenly intensify with a swelling sense of terror and imminent doom.

Zoey looked up through the opened doors of the cellar, her eyes wide with fear. Far beyond, she could see the bright glow of the raging infernos outside, a hellish backdrop to the impossible thing that she saw beginning to move through the opened doors. It was a sight she had previously thought to only be a part of her nightmares, something she had imagined, but something she now realized had actually been a genuine memory. She had seen this before, this animated black mist. It began as something vaguely man-sized and somewhat humanoid-shaped but rapidly melted into a formless cloud of darkness, twisting and writhing with countless thin, wispy tendrils in all directions. It slithered along soundlessly down the stairs, part of it hanging within the air like an evil cloud and part of the drooling down the stairs with an almost liquid sort of motion. Zoey scooted away from it frantically, backing away toward the place where she had landed after her initial fall. The boy wasn't just crying now; he was screaming, shrieking in an even higher-pitched version of the same horrible, terrified sounds that Mike had made not long ago.

“No. No! No!” Zoey cried as the darkness crept towards the boy. “Leave him alone! Stop it! Leave that poor kid alone!”

The kid was wailing breathlessly now, sensing the approach of that vile mass of what she could only presume was either a manifestation of purely negative energy

or something from the bowels of Hell itself. She felt even more helpless than the child probably did. If she was watching a ghostly echo of past events, a sort of looping sequence in time, then there was nothing at all she could do to stop this from playing itself out yet again. How often did this happen? Every night? Every so many years? Or only when provoked by a stupid wannabe witch meddling with forces she neither fully understood nor adequately knew how to control? It wasn't bad enough that her foolishness had led the spirit of that poor boy to relive his own demise yet again; somehow, her attempted consecration had changed this repeated image into an intelligent, violently capable entity, one that had apparently lashed out at her friends.

Spells were out of the question. Prayers seemed woefully inadequate. And considering that the thing threatening the boy appeared to be nothing but a malicious but shapeless mist of blackness, she couldn't think of a single thing that would be effective against it. She couldn't punch it, kick it, or hit it with an object because it was hardly even a tangible thing. It was there, but... not... and it was going to kill that boy, it would, she knew it, because she had seen this happen before. She couldn't remember how she had found herself in this same cellar ten years ago, but she distinctly remembered it now, and she remembered actually trying to hit it, swinging her fists at it and accomplishing nothing beyond making the darkness swirl and flow around her arms like black steam. There was nothing she could do for this boy, nothing she could even do for herself, nothing but...

Something wrapped around her waist, jerking her off of her feet and flinging her over its shoulder forcefully as she screamed. Zoey flailed for just a moment, fighting for only a brief instant before she realized that she had been abruptly picked up and was being carried out of the cellar by Chad, slung over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing—adrenaline, his sturdy build, and her petite size. Out into the night they emerged, but not into the orange glow of a blazing fire as Zoey had expected to see. Instead, as Chad carried her without a word toward the Explorer parked at the end of the driveway, she saw exactly what she had seen before all of the screaming and blood had begun: the tool shed and the barn, both just worn, burnt, barely-there remains of the structures they had once been, now mostly hidden with weeds.

Chad finally set her down upon her feet, allowing her to lean back against the rear passenger-side door of the Explorer as he dug out his keys. "They're dead, Zoey. Gina and Mike are dead. I don't know what the hell that black misty-looking thing was, but it killed them both."

"The farmer," she replied wearily, so exhausted that she felt almost drugged at that point.

"The what?"

"The farmer... entity... thing..."

"Look, I don't know what it is, and I don't care. Whatever it is, we made it mad, and we've gotta get out of here," he said, unlocking the front passenger-side door and yanking it open. "C'mon, I'll help you."

Chad didn't just help her inside. He scooped her up into his arms and placed her inside the Ford, for whatever reason taking the time to fasten her seat belt for her. Even in a panic, he cared for her. Zoey was still trying to regain her bearings, still looking around in a dazed state as she struggled to make sense of how things



had so drastically changed outside since the start of this living nightmare. Chad wasn't even stopping to think, nor was he apparently trying to understand. Perhaps the wiser of the two of them, he was instead just choosing to react, to deal with the situation immediately as best he knew how. He hopped into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut, cranked the engine, and jerked the gearshift into Drive at the same time as he stomped on the accelerator. The Ford revved for an instant before the automatic transmission caught it a muted *bang*—that couldn't have been good for it—and the SUV lunged forward with a jerk, tires spinning in the dirt.

And it was only then, only when it was already too late, that Zoey realized that she had just made one more terrible mistake. She should have stopped him. She should have warned him. For crying out loud, why hadn't she told him about this part? And if she had, then why hadn't she made it more clear to him? They flew up the winding, worn, and overgrown driveway, sailing over the bumps with reckless abandon as the Explorer's suspension clunked and heaved to try to accommodate the terrain, the engine screaming up through first gear and into second.

“Chad! Chad, stop!” she cried. “Stop the car! Please, stop!”

“Stop? Stop for what? We've gotta get out of here!” he responded, jerking the wheel to the right. The Explorer slid, skipped, and pitched hard to the right, feeling almost as if its passenger-side wheels had left the ground completely, and then it settled back down harshly as he straightened the fishtailing SUV out upon the dirt road. He stomped back down upon the throttle and the Explorer regained traction, surging forward to the north toward the highway from whence they had come.

“You don't understand! This happened before!” Zoey warned him loudly. “Please, just stop the...”

She saw it out of the corner of her eye, even before Chad did, whose attention had momentarily been drawn toward her as she'd been making her futile attempt to explain the threat. She saw it, she gasped, and Chad must have seen it with his peripheral vision, because he cursed and yanked the wheel with both hands hard to the left, too hard, then jerked it in the opposite direction as they headed for the ditch, too sudden, and with too much correction. He was trying to avoid the German farmer with the black holes for eyes that came running out into the road in front of them... the same mistake that Zach had made ten years before.

Once again, the Explorer turned, slid, and skipped, but this time it pitched over violently, starting a terrible roll at over forty-five miles per hour. Zoey managed to brace her hands upon the roof, and the seat belt Chad had snapped into place drew painfully tight across her chest and waistline, holding her fast within the seat. Chad let out a brief yell that was abruptly cut off, and for a few moments, Zoey just closed her eyes and rode out the wreck. When the Ford finally stopped moving, it was resting upon its passenger-side flank, gravity pinning Zoey against her door. She had already been quite soaked by the cold waters of the cellar, but she became aware of a new wetness that was raining down upon her left arm and cheek in a few steady dribbles. She blinked up at it, looking over to what had once been the driver's side of the vehicle. Chad had been in such a hurry that he hadn't buckled himself in. The rollover had shattered all of the windows, and he had bounced halfway out of the cabin before being pinched apart at the middle

between the SUV's roof and the ground. What was dribbling all over her now, hot and coppery-scented, was coming from what remained of the lower half of her boyfriend.

Zoey wanted to scream. She wanted to just come apart at the seams, to completely let go of every last shred that remained of her sanity. She had seen, felt, heard, and experienced just far, far too much to even begin to process. She couldn't even begin to wrap her head around it all. Consciously, she was fully aware of everything that had happened. Physiologically, her body was still trying to catch up, her pain receptors gradually reporting in with sensations to let her know just how badly she had been hurt by this whole ordeal. But emotionally, she was just stuck. Something had snapped up there. Something had just gone kaput. Maybe it was temporary, or maybe that was it, maybe she really was broken. She was alive, at least in the clinical sense, but emotionally, psychologically... what was left? She didn't know where to even begin.

Moving as if she was acting upon a rehearsed script that only her body knew, Zoey calmly and quietly unlatched the buckle of her safety belt, shrugged out of it, and then crawled out of the opening that had once been the windshield of the Ford. There were bits of glass and such on the ground, things that dug into and cut into her hands slightly. She didn't really seem to care. She stood up and briefly looked around to regain her sense of direction. She caught a glimpse of the mangled remains that were the rest of Chad, approximately fifty feet away in the road. It registered as a fact, but not so much a feeling in her mind. She started walking back toward the house, limping moderately only because her ankle was damaged enough that there was some physical impairment to its movement. The pain was still there, but not really a bother now, again something that registered in her brain as data but did nothing to affect her actions.

Zoey, or rather what was left of her, lazily made her way back up the driveway, up the stairs, and in through the opening that led into the kitchen. Without looking, she stepped upon the door that was laid over the hole in the floor, somehow just knowing that it would be there this time, and she made her way through the kitchen, the dining room, and then the living room, turning and heading up the stairs to the second floor.

The scene was exactly as she had somehow expected to find it. Gina's body was sprawled out upon the floor very close to the same place where the chalk outline had been. A bright red pool of blood surrounded her, made all the more vivid by the light of the kerosene lantern that continued to burn. She had been stabbed countless times in the chest and neck, and the means of her demise had been left buried in her chest: the athame that Zoey had used to cast the circle at the start of the ceremony. The sheet of plywood that had been nailed over the broken window of the bedroom had somehow been ripped off and cast aside. Zoey stepped into the room, leaned partially out of the shattered window, and looked down, barely able to see the outline of Mike's crumpled body laying in an awkward position below.

It was a near-perfect repeat. *Nearly* perfect... but not quite. She was still alive. She had survived this once again. Had it been because the entity causing this had run out of energy? Had it only wanted to claim three lives this time instead of four? Did it find her soul to be unappealing enough that it did not wish to claim her?

No, that didn't make sense. The only possibility that occurred to Zoey as she stood there, still completely numb and broken in a bizarre state of shock and loss, was that the entity had needed her. And that's what it was, she had decided: an entity, a conscious, intelligent force of some kind, not quite a demon nor a spirit, but some other sort of entity. Whatever it was, it thrived upon sorrow, pain, terror, and death, and for reasons she could only guess—energy, sadism, hunger, curiosity, or something else. And it had used her twice now as a means to achieve its goals.

Without her, it could not have satisfied its urge to terrify, to torment, to break, and to kill. She hadn't needed to do these things with her own hands, nor had it forced her to commit those acts. All she had needed to do was bring these people here. She had brought her brother here, and it had killed him, but that hadn't been enough—just one life, and a young one at that. This time, she had brought three more, young yet somewhat mature souls—perfectly ripe, full of life, full of energy and will. One plus three equaled four. And four was apparently the number that it always preferred.

The German family. The hippies. Her brother plus her friends. Four, four, and four, a nice even number, just like the Four Corners (north, east, south, and west) and the four seasons. Weren't things supposed to happen in threes? Whatever a person sent out came back to them threefold. And why settle for four? Why not five? Why did it even matter?

Truth be told, it really didn't matter, and she knew it.

Zoey turned and looked back at the bedroom. She knelt beside the lantern, turning it off, and she watched the flame inside rapidly dim, flicker out, and then saw the glow of the wick inside gradually fade until it was going, going, and finally gone. Satisfied that it was extinguished, she then got up and began to make her way downstairs, unscrewing the cap on the side of the lamp, tilting it sideways, and shaking kerosene out of the lantern's fuel tank while quickly walking through the house. Saltwater may have been good for neutralizing negativity, but combustible fuels worked better for positive ignitions.

She dropped the emptied lamp as she made her way into the kitchen, reached inside of her jacket pocket, and found her disposable cigarette lighter. She hesitated for a moment after thumbing the striker and causing a flame to spring into life, watching it dance quietly as the butane hissed out of the lighter. Such a tiny little thing, that flame, yet it could do so much harm... and so much healing. She knelt, touched the flame near the floor where she had last splashed the kerosene, and she watched as the fuel caught with a soft woof sound. A trailing flame that started out as blue and flickered upward into yellow tips began to snake its way along the floor into the dining room and living room, where she had splashed it randomly upon the walls. The flames seemed to catch and spread with increasing swiftness until they had completely ignited the scattered kerosene. Zoey stood and watched for a moment before thoughtlessly reaching into her jacket and taking out a cigarette, lighting it as well before tossing the lighter and the remaining pack of cigarettes at the blossoming garden of flames. She had no logical or emotional reason for this, except... why not?

She turned and took a single step toward the kitchen doorway. She paused in mid-step, her foot hovering in mid-air as she looked down and saw that the door

was once again no longer laying over the hole in the floor. She took her foot back and paused for a few moments, taking another drag from her cigarette. The door hadn't simply disappeared this time; it had replaced itself back in the door frame, exactly as it had been when she and her friends had first arrived. She stared at it for a few moments, thinking, pondering, smoking... and then it clicked. And she felt a strange smile beginning to curve her lips.

"Consecration isn't just about blessing something," she reminded herself as she recalled something that she had read. "It's a way of preparing a tool for sacred use." She looked up at the hole in the ceiling, then turned around to face the growing flames in the other room. "This house is a tool." She carefully stepped over the hole in the floor, grabbing the doorknob and clinging to it to stop herself from falling over backward into the cellar. "Every tool has a purpose. Some tools are for doing. Others are for understanding."

She took one last look back over her shoulder, watching the flames curl and peel away the layers of antique wallpaper while darkening the chipped, flaking white paint of the trim. Zoey smiled, taking one last drag upon her cigarette before flicking it into the room full of fire that had begun to creep into the kitchen.

"And now I understand what I need to do."

She closed her eyes, she inhaled deeply—toxic, acrid smoke filled her lungs, yet it somehow did not burn—and she turned the doorknob while pulling upon the door. Her breath came out in a huff as she felt the door open with a sort of *whoosh* that blasted a sudden rush of fresh air over her from outside. Behind her eyelids, she saw a sudden brightness flare into being, the crackle and roar of the flames behind her was instantly hushed, and the blessings of all her full senses and emotions were somehow restored. She opened her eyes as she took that first step outside onto the porch.

"Whoa!"

She found herself suddenly facing Chad. It was daylight. Behind him stood Gina, stowing her roll of toilet paper back into her canvas bag, and Mike, still lugging a big cooler full of ice and beverages. Chad was clearly surprised to see her standing in front of him, glancing back over his shoulder a couple of times and looking to Zoey with a confused expression.

"How... wait... what?" he stammered. "How did you get in there? I thought you were back there a second ago...?"

Zoey somehow managed not to let her own surprise show upon her face. The smile she gave him was one of immeasurable relief, yet there was no way he could have known the true cause for her smile.

"I took another path."

"Oh." He stood there for a moment, shrugging that off. "So, umm... are we going in?"

Zoey brushed past Chad, closing the door behind herself. She felt it lock behind her as her fingertips lingered upon the doorknob. She looked at Gina with a smile she couldn't lose, and then to Mike, shaking her head.

"Nah," she said. "We don't have any business being in there."

"What do you mean? I thought that was the whole reason we came out here in the first place?" Gina asked, looking and sounding disappointed. "Y'know, to see if this place really is haunted and to set the bad vibes straight...?"

Zoey shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair, finding it to be perfectly dry, as were her clothes. Her ankle felt perfectly fine as she walked away from the door and descended the steps.

"Yeah, well... I guess I realized that sort of thing is way out of my league." She kicked aside a loose piece of wood that had once been a part of a handrail for the steps. "Besides, this place is in worse shape than I thought. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"But... I thought you said you needed a feeling of closure?"

"I came, I saw, and now I understand." She glanced back at him with a smile. "It's all good."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

"You mean you poked your head in there for just a minute, and now we're already leaving?" Mike complained. "I carried this stupid thing all the way over here for nothing, and now I've gotta carry it right back?"

"Jeez! Instead of whining, maybe just try asking for help," Gina said, taking hold of one of the cooler's handles with a jerk.

"My, what strong arms you have, my dear," Mike joked as he followed her back down the stairs of the porch.

"All the better to beat your ass with," she giggled. Turning to Zoey as they walked ahead, Gina asked, "So, what's the deal? You chickened out already?"

"I had a little epiphany, that's all," she replied with a shrug, taking Chad's hand and walking toward the Explorer.

"An epiphany? When?"

"Just a little while ago."

"Oh? What was it?"

"Instead of trying to tinker with something that I don't even remotely understand, I'm probably better off just leaving it well enough alone," she explained. Zoey shrugged. "Some things aren't even meant to be understood in the first place, anyway."

Soon, they were back on the road, heading for the cemetery in Plains, Kansas where her brother had been buried. They had a bit of a makeshift picnic next to his grave, and Zoey poured a shot of whiskey over her brother's grave before they departed for Dodge City to seek out a movie to watch that night. She later learned that the entire farm house and the remains of its surrounding buildings had burned to the ground during an unexplained fire approximately a month later. Not long after that, the property was cleared entirely of the debris and trees, bulldozed flat, and it became nothing more than another portion of the wheat fields that surrounded the entire area. For the rest of her years, she never spoke a single word to anyone about what she had experienced. She didn't need to. Whether or not she had succeeded with consecrating the land, she certainly had at least succeeded in clearing one thing: her conscience.

