

The Horror of the Shade

Void Trilogy, #1

by Peter Meredith, 1968-2022

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*Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,
 I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.
 In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.
 Beyond this place of wrath and
 tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
 And yet the menace of the years
 Finds and shall find me unafraid.
 It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the
 scroll,
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.
 Invictus,
 William Ernest Henley, 1875*

Chapter 1

**The Row-Adrina
 June 15, 1959**

When Adrina woke that morning with sweat chilling her pillow and her heart making sporadic, spastic thumps in her chest, she knew it would be bad. Even before she sat up the anxiety was on her. It seemed almost as if a cloud of fear hung in the air making it difficult for her to find her breath.

She puttered around the kitchen of her small apartment, waiting for it to happen. There was nothing else for her to do but wait. What would happen, would happen. There was no avoiding it. And she wouldn't even try. If she did, it would only make things worse.

Her growing anxiety made her feel she had to pee frequently, and she found herself sitting on the toilet for half the morning, staring blankly at the tile pattern of the floor. It was all very neat and straight.

Adrina called in sick to work. She was on the cleaning staff for a swanky New York hotel and knew she'd be useless that day. It was better if she were alone, fewer people would get hurt.

"You know that won't matter a bit!" she scolded herself. No, it wouldn't matter, but she knew this wasn't about the hotel, or any of the service staff she worked with. This was far more personal.

With her nails long bitten down to nubs, she began to pace. To the window, to the door, to the bathroom. With each trip to the window, she would peek out hesitantly, afraid of what she might see. Always the same dull view.

On one of her many trips to the bathroom, she gazed for some time at the tired, scared face in the mirror. She had been pretty once, but that had been many years before, and at 68, her black hair had long been replaced by grey. Now that was being replaced too, and a smattering of white hairs stood out from the rest. Looking at them, a sigh that was almost a death rattle escaped her—she didn't notice.

With each trip to the door, she walked almost tiptoe across the carpet, listening for any sound in the hall. She thought about scooting a chair over to the door, so she could look out through the peephole, but she knew she would look ridiculous. In her youth she stood five feet tall, but she had been shrinking steadily for twenty years and the peephole was all but useless to her now.

The day dragged on, and it was not until after dinner that *it* finally came. There was a loud knock on the door and Adrina clutched her hands to her scrawny chest; she wasn't expecting anyone. Except that she was. In her heart, she knew that hiding in her apartment wouldn't stop what had to happen. She was about to open the door and there'd be someone standing there and she would *know*. She would know something that she couldn't possibly know.

Today it would be about death, there was no question. Maybe one terrible death, maybe more, perhaps a lot more. It had always been this way when she was this keyed up. Someone was going to die.

"Let it be me, let it be me," she repeated to herself as she walked down the little hall. Adrina thought she was ready for death however, in this she was terribly wrong. She paused at the door, afraid of what was to come, but the sound of another, more insistent knock, made her face her fears and turn the knob.

"Hello, Mother." Adrina's son Tomas stood in the doorway. He looked terrible; never in her life had she seen someone with eyes so bloodshot. He had great dark

circles under them that were swollen and puffy. Clearly he had not slept in a long time, and the dark circles made his sallow skin appear sickly yellow. His normally neat black hair stood out uncombed and his face was unshaven...

Facing away from Adrina, Tomas knelt on the hardwood floor of a barren room. It was a room she had never seen before. The wood flooring was glossy and looked polished, and was spotless, without a trace of dirt or dust. Adrina stood behind her kneeling son, holding a heavy, heavy gun in her right hand. It felt like she must have just pulled it out of a freezer; it was almost painfully cold. Her vision focused on the back of Tomas' head; his hair was just beginning to show a few grey hairs.

Emotionless she nudged the barrel up against his head and pulled the trigger. It was loud and a spike of pain shot through both ears, she didn't care—she seemed beyond caring. The bullet blasted out of her son's face, spraying the room with blood and gore. About the edges, her vision clouded and tunneled, so that only when he toppled over onto a girl, did Adrina realize the walls were a harsh stark white.

Tomas' blood stood out brightly against the white. It trickled down... down, slowly down. Adrina's eyes followed the blood until it slid to the flooring where it gathered with more blood in a pool. Tomas sprawled face down over the body of a girl who was pale as death. His blood pooled around her and steam rose from it.

..."Hello, Tomas," her voice was a hollow whisper. The nervousness was gone and in its place was only stunned disbelief.

"I need your help badly," Tomas said desperately. He walked in uninvited and began to pace the room, frantically. He seemed to be looking for the right words. "Mother, I..." he stopped in midsentence, his eyes on the carpet as his mind worked.

The images of the future spun around in her mind. The cold, cold gun; the blood flying; the pale girl wearing what looked to be a long pillowcase. It had to be wrong!

It's never wrong.

Her mind went over the vision a second time. Tomas had been kneeling and facing away, it could have been someone else. It had to be someone else.

Her's wearing the same shirt, a voice inside her said. It'll be today.

"I don't think I c-can hel-hel-help you that way," Adrina stammered, her voice still with only the strength of a whisper.

He looked at her sharply. "What way? What do you know?" he demanded and this question focused her quickly. She couldn't tell him of her vision, no matter what. How this could get worse, she didn't know, but it would be, if she tried in any way to avert his fate. Somehow it would be worse.

"I, I, I don't have any money for you, if that's what you want." It was all she could think of to say. It was a poor cover up and Tomas saw through it.

"Why would I want money? Don't play stupid with me, Mother! I know you have a gift... powers... or clairvoyance or something. That's the reason why I'm here." He was angry and stared hard at her. In a moment however, his exhaustion doused the anger and his shoulders slumped. "You know things you shouldn't. You see the future, right? I've known since I was a kid," he added quietly.

"You call it a gift?" Adrina's voice became strident. "It's not a gift, it's..."

"You can tell me in the car," Tomas said cutting her off. He gripped her shoulders with both of his hands and gave her a slight shake. "I need you to come

with me. You'll come, right? It's Emily." His red eyes looked suddenly very sad, his face drooping in misery. "She needs you... your kind of help."

Adrina didn't think she would be much help to Emily. In the vision, the body on the floor had to be her granddaughter and Adrina was sure she was dead at that point. She'd been so pale that Adrina hadn't even recognized her, and she wondered again how this could get any worse.

She drew in a long breath. "I'll come and I'll do what I can, but...but, I won't, I can't..." There was no way she could kill her own son. How was she supposed to help? She didn't even know what she was supposed to do, other than pull a trigger. Her mind started to replay the vision and she shook her head, hard.

"Good. Do you need anything to... to... you know, bring anything?" he asked. Adrina was confused and thought Tomas meant luggage.

"Where are we going?" The image of the heavy gun had never left her, its grip had been like ice. "Is it cold there? Should I bring a coat?"

"We're going to my base on Governors Island," he paused, thinking. "It will be cold, yes, you'll need a coat. Bring your heaviest coat and your... do you need anything to, you know..." He looked at her expectantly, his red eyes darting about her face. "You know, to cast a spell or something"

"A spell?" she cried. First with the vision and now with Tomas talking spells, Adrina suddenly worried that Tomas might have gone insane. He certainly looked it. She also realized with dawning horror how this could get worse. If she interfered in some way, even by accident, he might go on a rampage, killing who knows how many others. "No. No I don't think I'll need a spell," she said calmly with a forced smile.

Her abrupt mood change caused Tomas' brows to come down in consternation. "Mother, listen to me. Something has happened to Emily. I don't know what exactly." He paused blinking repeatedly, trying to hold back tears. "I think maybe... she might be possessed by a..." he looked away from Adrina now, shaking his head back and forth slowly as if he couldn't believe what he was saying. "By a demon I think," he finished in a whisper.

He wasn't crazy and worse he was telling the truth. Adrina *knew* it. For the second time in ten minutes, she *knew*. Goose bumps broke out down her arms and back and she shivered momentarily. There was a demon. How was this possible?

"It's important you tell me everything you know," she said.

"Everything? Ok, ok, well, there've been weird things going on in that house for a while. Really, since we first moved in. Small things, like the furnace wouldn't stay lit and things would go missing and sometimes there are odd sounds in the house. Like that. But... but it was the other day, Friday? What day is today?" he asked her.

"Monday dear," she replied calmly. Her voice was calm but her body was beginning to shake. It started in her arms and hands, but soon even her chest felt like it was vibrating. She went to the couch and sat down.

Tomas blinked a few times and then rubbed at his eyes. Adrina could imagine how gritty they must feel. "Lord, it was Friday night. That long." He sighed, a deep tired sigh. "Emily had a friend spending the night, and I guess something happened."

His mouth hung open and he shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know what. I was in bed with Mary, when I heard a scream. It was a scream like someone was scared to death... and... and... and it was coming from the attic where Emily's room is. I was up and running out of my room when I heard racing footsteps on the backstairs. I stopped. I figured the girls were going to come tell me about a mouse or spider or something. However, it was Emily's friend. She sped down the stairs right past the second floor landing and down the next set of stairs in a blur."

"I went to the landing and was about to call down when I felt the cold coming from the attic. It was like winter up there. I was shirtless, because it had been a warm night, but the cold made me start to shiver. I went up the stairs and everything was dark, so I turned on the hall light at the top, and... and." He stopped talking. Adrina saw that he too was shaking. His eyes were large and far away, seeing whatever it was in the attic. "And the hall is only about fifteen feet long. And Emily's room is on the far right. And there are a couple of other rooms and... and... and."

"And what was in Emily's room?" Adrina prompted him.

"I went to her doorway and there she was lying on the floor and it looked like she was on fire, you see?" He turned to his mother, nodding his head to get her to agree with him.

Adrina was horrified at the thought of her granddaughter on fire. "Why was it so cold if she was on fire?"

Tomas shook his head. "I thought she was on fire, so I ran to her, thinking to smother the flames, but there were none, there was only smoke. I was just putting my hands out to grab her when I touched it." He had his hands out in imitation of himself, they were shaking badly, and for the first time Adrina noticed that he had a bandage on his left hand. He balled them up and held them to his chest. "I screamed. I know I screamed. It was the coldest thing and... and... the deadest." His eyes were far away again. He started to weep. "It sucked on my hand. It was dead, it wanted me."

Adrina watched him cry, feeling bewildered. She didn't know what he meant by his last sentence and she was sure she didn't want to. Her arms reached out for him and he cried against her for several minutes. When he had settled somewhat she said, "What happened next, I need to know."

He blubbered again but this time savagely, "I am such a coward! I almost ran away and left Emily. I had fallen over when... when I touched it. If I hadn't I would have ran, I know it."

A dreadful thought occurred to Adrina. "Did you get her away from it?"

"Yes." The exhaustion was back, sucking the energy out of him and with it came an uncaring attitude. "It was like smoke that seemed to start about a foot over her. It was over her... her... her chest. So, I sort of crept to her feet and pulled her to me. I was so scared. I just picked her up and ran."

Adrina slid closer to her son. "You did everything you could. No one could have done better."

"But what do I do now?" His red eyes looked into her black ones. "How do I save her?"

"Save her? I thought you said you grabbed her and ran."

"I did, I did, but she hasn't woken up... she's in some sort of coma. It's the demon! Emily is freezing cold to touch. They have these electric blankets on her constantly, but she doesn't get warm. And when you touch her..." He paused, his fingers in the air touching something that wasn't there. "You feel the heat pull out of you, like she is sucking it from you somehow."

Adrina's head overflowed with too much unwanted information. She felt like throwing it up or crying it out. She wanted to make some tea, then go to bed and stay there where it was safe. Instead, she spoke the words that she would later regret, "I'll go with you, and I'll do what I can. I fear it won't be much." Besides killing her son, she didn't know how she was going to be any help at all.

2

The trip from Queens through the city was actually slower in the car than if they had taken the subway. Traffic had them crawling along and Adrina had nothing to do, but stare out the window as anxiety built up in her. Every few seconds, her hand would wrap itself around the ice-cold grip of an imaginary gun. The gun would be loud. Would it wake the neighbors? Would the police be called? Did she care? She decided that she didn't. She was on her way to kill her son, how could she care about anything else?

There was just one part of the trip when the anxiety left her mind.

It occurred during the short ferryboat ride from the southern tip of Manhattan to the Army base on Governors Island. She got out of the car and stood looking out at the beautiful view while the last light of day was setting just to the side of the Statue of Liberty, which looked toy-like with the distance. The other view, down the length of the boat, was of New York City, brightly lit just for her enjoyment or so it seemed.

The lights made the city look alive and inviting and she wished momentarily that she was young again, and that her worries would just flit out of her and drift out to sea. Adrina breathed in the sea air and felt joy at the weather, which was perfect, just the right shade of warmth. She wanted it to last, but the ride was short and Tomas honked his horn in a hurry to be killed.

The day had been one of the longest in her life, however now that the end was drawing near, time sped up with a dizzying pace. In what felt like seconds they had docked and so quickly after they neared the church to collect the priest. Right away Adrina *knew* he was not going to attempt a real exorcism.

Tomas pulled up to the little white church and hopped out without killing the engine. "Are you all ready?" he asked the priest, who stood outside.

She felt it then. It came in little bursts: *Tomas had pressured the priest into doing an exorcism. The priest didn't really believe in demons or Hell for that matter; the priest would go through the motions and perform Last Rites but in Latin and wouldn't do the needless exorcism; he would then go home and have some strawberry ice cream and watch the late news.*

Father Menning was a small slim man; he wore the simple black attire of his calling and carried nothing but a single book and a black bag that reminded Adrina of a time when doctors made house calls.

He gave the appearance of concern, nodding gravely and was just about to speak when Adrina asked, "May I help you with your things?" She climbed out of the car slowly hearing her knees pop. Father Menning looked confused at her question. "I can carry your vestments and maybe the censer?" Adrina didn't wait for the priest but started to move directly toward the church.

Tomas hurried to catch up. "Right, just tell me what I can carry for you." The priest stood for a moment contemplating and then sighed moving with some reluctance to unlock the doors.

Once they entered, the priest bustled about with Adrina always nearby offering suggestions; she unfortunately knew the basics of exorcism. "Do you have an olive branch? Holy water is best used with an olive branch, rather than this... ah?"

"That is an aspergillum, and it'll work just fine."

"You should wear the proper vestments, you know. The violet from the Easter service will be good. Besides it'll be cold." Her mind strayed again to the cold gun and she rubbed her hands together as if they were already freezing.

"She's right, you'll want to bundle up," Tomas agreed.

The priest almost started to protest the wearing of the Easter Vestments, but stopped. For the first time he looked to be taking this seriously. Father Menning, with Adrina's supervision gathered his necessary accoutrements and piling into Tomas' car, they made their way to the islands one small hospital. As before Tomas left the car running and hopping out, disappeared into the building.

Father Menning tried to make small talk, which aggravated Adrina to no end, but again Tomas was quick and back in a wink. How he was able to get the girl out of the hospital, she had no idea. He laid the cold dead body of Emily across the long back seat of the Buick, and Adrina recognized the pillowcase that the girl wore, but now saw that it was only a hospital gown.

"She's still alive... I know she may not look it, but she still is," Tomas assured the priest, who had shrunk back away from the girl's body looking disgusted. Adrina reached out and touched her granddaughter, but pulled her hand away, rubbing it.

It was there beneath Emily's skin. The demon lay hiding just below the surface and the touch had been as cold as sin.

Time seemed to compress in on itself, like the cars of train in a head-on collision. Adrina had barely put on her seat belt before she saw Colonels Row, where her son lived. All the other homes on the Row were lit up and pretty in the night, but his was completely dark and foreboding.

As they pulled up to it, she could see that Father Menning finally understood. Just touching the unnaturally cold bricks of the house left no room for doubt and he marveled at the frost, which continually formed and evaporated on them.

He was a brave man and seemingly firm in his faith and at the urging of Adrina, he baptized them and heard their confessions. Adrina wanted to confess about the gun and about her plan to shoot Tomas in the back of the head and drench the wall with his blood, but she couldn't. She kept reminding herself that it'd be worse if she mentioned anything, though more and more she hoped and prayed her vision had been a mistake. It was Tomas' only chance.

Before they entered the house Father Menning had a censer smoking, sending up grey plumes of fragrant smoldering spices. He swung the brazier about the kitchen and began exhorting loudly in Latin.

Adrina didn't speak the dead language, however she had been a part of four exorcisms in her time, two of which had been real. They had been terrifying, hair-raising experiences, but she knew it was the priest and Emily, who were in the most danger. Still she shook with fear.

The house had a cold sinister feel to it. The kitchen was far darker than it had any right to be and Adrina took solace in the small glow of the brazier. She followed around after the priest carrying the silver container of holy water. Every few seconds he would dunk the aspergillum in it and liberally splash the water on the walls and floors.

Tomas, who stood in the near freezing dark holding his daughter, became impatient. "The demon is in the attic."

"Colonel, it's best to be cautious. We'll be up there in a few minutes."

Father Menning was a man of his word and he slowly went up the back staircase still going on in Latin. They followed him despite the growing cold and the steadily escalating fear.

Their fear slowly ramped up, however the priest seemed particularly immune to it—that is until they reached Emily's room and saw the demon. Then Father Menning ceased speaking and stood in mute horror.

The demon appeared to be a tremendous column of black and grey smoke. At first Adrina thought it had a vague spiderlike shape with many thin arms and legs, but that was an illusion. What she had at mistakenly thought to be arms and legs, were actually tendrils of smoke. These started as barely visible wisps a few feet from it, but then they seemed to gain mass and thickness as they streamed toward the "body" of the demon. It looked to have a head too, and that was the worst. In the head was a terrible opening, a hole from which nothing could escape.

It seemed to drink from this world through that void.

"Do the prayer again," Tomas demanded. The sound of his voice seemed to be muffled and far away.

The priest jumped a little at the words and then started his incantations once more, "Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei..."

The Latin barely registered on Adrina's ears; she felt lost and useless, and had stark terror running through her. She had no purpose there, except to die horribly. She wanted to look away, she wanted to run away, but neither was an option.

Forced by a power greater than her pathetic self, Adrina stared into the black pit of the demon's face. She would stare and stare until she was used up and what would happen after that, she was deathly afraid to find out. She hoped she'd die before that could happen, but she was certain the demon wouldn't allow it.

From the moment she had walked in, the demon held her in its gaze and she could only stand there and see what the demon wanted her to see, and think what the demon wanted her to think. For the moment, it wanted her to see the surprise it had for her. She was allowed to see the smoke of its body flowing up into the pit of its face. The smoke was all chaos and madness yet what lay beneath it was worse—it came together, congealing to form a streaming liquid gruel. In the foul

gruel there were shapes and it hurt Adrina deep in her chest to see these. An arm, a face, part of a torso. These would form out of the vile fluid and then sink back in.

The face was the worst.

Pain gripped her heart when she saw the face. It was the face of her granddaughter Emily, contorted into a silent scream of agony. The demon had Emily's soul and was letting it surface so that Adrina could feel her pain too. The demon enjoyed this, but it was a malicious evil joy and it was horrible to feel that sort of joy.

The demon drew them slowly toward it. Like a magnet it pulled everything into that black pit. Even the smoke and gruel that made the demon's body flowed continuously up into the endless void.

The air around them coursed into the thing and it was like a wind at Adrina's back. She leaned away, but the demon drew her on. It dragged the breath from her lungs and sucked the heat from her body. It ran off her, streaming into the voracious pit, leaving her cold inside and out.

The pit was feasting. Feasting on Tomas, feasting on the priest, but right then it was gorging itself on Adrina. Not just the heat of her life; the demon had opened her mind like a can of peaches and was savoring each morsel of sin, of fear, and especially of pain.

3

Because the demon wished it, Adrina suddenly remembered the first time her mother sent her to kill a chicken for their evening meal. She had been ten-years-old and a little scared, but wanted to prove herself. Going to the coop, she grabbed up the largest bird and carried it to the old tree stump. The small axe lay in the grass nearby. The head of it was stained with rust and blood and there were little pieces of old flesh on it. The axe looked like a dead thing itself. Adrina grew afraid to touch it, worried it would move, worried that maybe the axe was really alive and if she reached for it, it would bite her.

On the stump, the bird squawked in irritation and Adrina jumped. She screwed up her courage and bent to grab the axe.

It was warm.

Her hand drew back and she cast a look over her shoulder at their tiny shanty, but her mom wasn't about. The axe had felt warm, as if it were alive.

No! It was just a thing, a thing lying in the sun. But it felt like an evil hungry thing that enjoyed the death it caused. What else would it enjoy? Fear gripped her and Adrina nearly ran inside with the chicken. However, she knew her mother would be angry. She would just do it and not think about it.

Swallowing hard, Adrina grabbed up the little hand axe, and discovered not only that it was warm, but it also had a nasty smell about it—old death and new corruption.

Ignoring the smell as best she could, she laid the chicken on the stump, as she'd seen done countless times and brought the axe down hard.

The ungainly tool turned in her hand and hacked into the chicken's back and shoulder. Blood exploded out of the bird and it bounced about in her grip, squawking in terrific pain. Adrina looked upon the bird and the axe in confusion.

That never happened when her mom killed a bird. It always went so fast, but this was horrible. Choking back unexpected pity she stepped down lightly on the bird to hold it still. The axe was hot, drenched in blood and as she raised it a second time, she saw it was smiling a gory, blood-dripping smile. There had been no notch in the axe before, yet now one was plainly visible and it looked to be a wicked, hungry, toothy grin.

Horried, Adrina swung the axe down a second time, but again the axe, slippery with blood, turned to the side. This time she struck its back dead center and she had to pry the axe out of the bird that still squawked in terrific misery. The axe did not want to let go of the bird, it seemed to have a hold of it and Adrina had to work it back in forth before it would come out.

The wide grin was larger and bloodier.

Adrina knew what else the axe liked more than death, and that was pain. Death could happen in an instant but pain lasted longer. Ten-year-old Adrina, now drenched in blood, threw the axe from her, terrified. She let go of the chicken as well. It tried to run, but it veered off sideways, and fell over. The chicken took a long time to die, flopping about in delectable agony, while the axe lay grinning in the sun enjoying the spectacle. Adrina stood far back, crying and shaking as the coppery blood on her turned tacky...

Adrina gasped.

She was back in the almost silent room with the mumbling priest and the demon. Her stomach rolled over, she was going to be sick. Her throat started to work up and down yet still she stared at the silent black nothingness in the demon's face. Yes, this was good... the demon wanted her to throw up, but not just yet. It enjoyed the gorge coming up in her throat and the heaving of her stomach.

It was like chamber music playing in the background of its cruel banquet. Adrina tried to fight it, but it was no use, next she tried to force herself to vomit. However, the demon enjoyed this too much; vomiting was like death.

It ended things.

Not only that, there was always a moment after getting sick when she would feel just a little bit better, even if for a second. Kind of like the feeling she had at the end of being raped. Maybe there had been more than just a feeling of relief.

Wasn't there just a bit of pleasure in it? The unbidden thought couldn't have been hers; it had to be the demon's.

The rapes weren't all bad—you liked it.

It had to be the demon. It had to be.

"No, no. I didn't like it, it was..." Adrina cried aloud.

She didn't want to remember the rapes. However, the demon wanted it from her and as she stared, she was powerless to stop it. The demon could force itself into her mind, so that she felt wide open, like an open book... open as her legs had been the first time with Claudio Butolask.

"No!" she screamed. However, the fiend sucked the sound directly from her throat, and she barely even heard herself.

Her legs had been pried open brutally with a harshness that seemed unnecessarily sadistic. The nails of his right hand dug deep and cruel into her flesh making her bleed. Her mind screamed but she was afraid to make even the slightest noise, she'd been warned. And she believed he would keep his promise.

Butolask had held the long knife between her legs and had asked which she wanted in her: him or the knife? He told her if she chose him, she would have to ask nicely...in the end, she begged him. Before he brought out the knife Adrina had fought hard, but her skinny fourteen-year-old body was no match. Butolask was small but he was strong. He didn't look it, but he was. Adrina had foolishly thought she didn't need to be careful around a small man, a man her own size.

Even though he had a knife and she was crippled with fear, he gripped her around the throat with his left hand and squeezed. Hard. Her face turned red and swollen, the veins bulging, her eyes bugging out of her head. Her world started to go black around the edges of her vision. Butolask said something to her, but she couldn't tell what.

His face leered at her, just above her, smiling. She felt a stinging on her cheek and then again. He was slapping her but as she began to pass out it was a distant feeling. Unfortunately he relaxed his grip on her throat and she became aware again.

He wanted her to be awake—he wanted her to feel everything. Leaning his weight on her left thigh, he easily pried her legs apart. He was too strong.

A moment later he ripped into her. It hurt badly. The pain shrieked inside her. She felt something rip and hot blood ran. Adrina was afraid for her insides. Butolask grunted and rutted and the pain was very great, but her fear that she was torn up and ruined inside occupied her almost completely. What had he done to her?

She tried lifting herself up and back but he gripped her throat harder and held her in place. When after an eternity he finally came it burned terribly and she cried out despite his warnings. However the searing pain faded quickly and with one final spasm he was done. He pulled out and when he did the relief was so intense, that... that... it felt good.

4

"Mother! Mother!" There was someone calling to her from a great distance. It sounded like she was at the beach and the wind whipped away the shout, before it could reach her ears. A hand grabbed her roughly and tried to pull her around, but the demon's gaze from across the room was like a magnet and there was no denying it. Her body turned, but her head and neck didn't, they twisted horribly as she was forced to stare.

Mercifully a hand came down in front of her vision, blocking the sight of that foul unending void. Her mind was suddenly closed to it, but the demon was still all about her demanding more, hammering at her.

"No—no, it didn't feel good," she whispered. "It didn't..."

"Mother! Look at me!" She felt slow and stupid and old. Every one of her sixty-eight years pressed down on her bending her back. She had no strength to turn

around, to face away from the demon. It was almost too much even to stand and her legs began to shake.

Suddenly and mercifully the presence of the demon, beating at the edges of her mind lifted. She was no longer its focus; it had looked away.

Adrina fell to her hands and knees and vomited. She vomited again and then retched repeatedly. The spew drew her eyes to it with ghastly fascination. The half-liquid runny mess drained toward the demon as if it was running down hill. It reached the base of the smoking fiend and started to drip upward into the smoke. Adrina began to gag uncontrollably at the sight, unable to breathe.

Tomas grabbed her up in his arms from behind and lifted her off the floor, turning her away from the demon. He held her briefly, but as she began to breathe easier, he yelled into her ear.

"You're ok. Can you hear me?"

She looked into her son's face. His eyes were so terrifically red and blood shot that they seemed almost inhuman.

It was then that the priest screamed, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! Please! Please, I didn't mean it!" His face wore a look of fearful desperation and his eyes seemed to spin madly in their sockets. "No! No! Please I didn't mean it! Take her instead!" Swaying like a drunk, he came at Adrina.

Tomas gave him a quick shove away from his mother and the priest fell to the floor still screaming and begging for forgiveness. As they watched in horror, he started tearing at his own eyes and soon blood stained his fingers.

As the priest mutilated himself neither Tomas nor Adrina could turn away. "Mother, what do we do?" Tomas begged.

They had almost no time before there was nothing left of the priest—the demon was doing something horrible to the man. After that, it would be one of them clawing their own eyes out. Adrina knew the demon would go for her again, she still had so much pain left to agonize over.

"I don't... I... don't," she said hesitantly. There was one thing she could do, but the consequence was too great—in her mind she saw again the gun in her hands and Tomas' blood spraying the wall.

Was that the penalty?

Adrina *knew* things. Passively, images of the future came to her. In brief flashes she just *knew*. However... however, if she wanted to or needed to badly enough she could see the future—purposefully.

Only there was a price to be paid, always.

The price this time: the life of her son; killed by her own hand.

This was why she hesitated. Save herself or her son. There was no hope for the priest or poor Emily. Adrina could look into the future or...

"Run," she said to Tomas in a tiny voice. There was no way she could run; she would have trouble even making it to the door in the state she was in. He was the only one with any chance of getting out alive.

"What?" Tomas shouted.

Father Menning no longer clawed at his eyes, they were gone. Now he was turning a fantastic shade of deep red. There was almost no time left.

"Run!" Again, she said it too quietly, barely above a whisper and he bent his head down so that his ear was next to her mouth. "Run please," the words left her mouth without strength.

She knew what would happen if he left her. The demon would own her soul for all time and the very thought sapped her will.

"You need to speak up!" he shouted.

Adrina knew that if he didn't start running in the next couple of seconds, he wouldn't make it—her entire being shook with fear, but somehow she summoned the strength to yell, "Run!"

Tomas began shaking his head—his lips moving—his finger pointing. She tried to shove him away, but it was too late. She *knew* it.

Adrina had taken too long. Her eyes were drawn to the priest and he was now a repulsive purple color. Her son would never make it out of the house alive. She had killed him with her cowardice and there was nothing left to do but to save herself.

Chapter 2

Commander William Jern—In the House.

May 10, 1980

1

Commander William Jern considered the weather. His upturned face scanned, first eastward as always in the morning, and then slowly rotated a full 360 degrees. The dull clouds drizzled a light chilly rain, and looked like they would all day.

This was a morning ritual for him dating back to the days when having his own Cutter was still a possibility. His mind pictured one of the long, gleaming white boats the Coast Guard used for drug interdiction, search and rescue, and patrols—he gave a little sigh.

"Let's go Katie; you don't want to be late." In the military being late was a cardinal sin. Katie looked up at her father and had to crane her neck far back to do it. He was just over six feet tall, very strong and broadly built, while she was a tiny thing.

"Can I wear your hat, Daddy?" Katie asked as she danced around the puddles. She loved wearing his broad-brimmed white hat with the gold braid. It had meaning to her; it marked her as *Daddy's Girl*, and of course with it there would be the, *Oh so cute!* compliments that every 6-year-old girl lived for.

"Not today honey, I think it will mess up your pretty braids. Mommy worked very hard on them, didn't she?" Braiding hair was quite beyond William, it looked to be an extremely complicated endeavor. The most he would ever attempt were pigtails and they usually came off cockeyed.

His own hair was dirty blonde and he never permitted it to grow longer than one inch. He had the same hairstyle, which could only be referred to as "regulation" for his entire eighteen years with the Coast Guard.

"She didn't work hard at all and my hair is real hard too. Feel." Running back to him, Katie pulled off her little plastic hood and presented her shoulder length blonde hair to him. He dutifully reached down and touched it very gently. He was not about to knock one of those braids out of place. "Daddy, you gotta feel harder than that!" she exclaimed still holding her head out to him.

"Yes, I felt the toughness honey, but the answer is still no. I have to keep my hat on while we're outside. Regulations, remember?"

"Yeah, those are like rules, right? We have rules in Miss Canaday's class. You're not allowed to chew gum and there's this boy who is kinda mean, Donny, and he had to put his gum on his nose and leave it there for a long time!" She giggled at the memory, "Do you have that rule too?"

"Oh yes, we have the *gum on the nose rule*. I constantly have lieutenants walking about saluting with gum on their noses. How else do you think they'll learn their lessons?"

Katie laughed loudly at the thought and began skipping as he walked along beside her. She would go out of her way to leap over the puddles and William smiled at her; of his three children, she was currently his favorite.

2

The question of "favorites" had come up the week before when one of his subordinates, Lieutenant Valdens, had mentioned he had a favorite and really didn't like his other children. This seemed like an odd and rude thing to say, but it caused William to consider whether he had favorites. He didn't think he did, except when he got home that night, he had to reconsider.

He was helping his sixteen-year-old daughter, Talitha with her homework and suddenly the thought struck him, "She's my favorite." Talitha was beautiful like her mother, brainy like her father, kind, gentle, and funny as well. William loved her with all of his heart.

However, the notion that he loved her more than he loved the others made him a bit sad. He decided he needed to spend more time with his other children and went to his son's room. As usual, William ended up in a wrestling match with Will. At seventeen, his son was fast becoming a man and couldn't wait for the day when he could out-wrestle his dad.

That day wasn't far off since Will was already taller than, and almost as strong as William. Will was athletic and handsome, and William was very proud of his son. From a young age, he was extremely personable and could sit among adults and converse on their level. With all that, one would think he would have a certain amount of conceit, but Will was also very humble. Lying there, holding his son in his "Unbreakable Death Grip," William realized that he had been wrong earlier and that it was his son who was really his favorite.

And later that night after William read Katie her bedtime story: *Are You My Mother* and tickled her until she couldn't breathe, he concluded that his favorite

child was whichever one was closest to him at the moment. He didn't know if this was considered proper parenting, but he didn't much care either.

Now, watching his daughter skip about the puddles in her Minnie Mouse raincoat and matching shoes, his heart swelled with the love he felt for her.

He asked her, "Do you still think Miss Canaday is the meanest teacher ever?"

"What? No Miss Canaday is the best teacher I ever had." This was odd since Katie had proclaimed her: "The Meanest Teacher" ever just two days ago.

William's wife Gayle had received a call from Miss Canaday who stated that Katie had become too affectionate with one of the boys. Too affectionate, didn't sit well with William. His other daughter Talitha even at a young age, considered herself above such nonsense. She saw almost all boys as terribly immature and beneath her dignity. This was an attitude William appreciated, kissing boys in the first grade was not.

That night William and Gayle had a talk with Katie, and William took the lead, "Katherine, we need to discuss how you're acting in school. With boys that is. Miss Canaday tells us that you've been doing quite a bit of kissing. Honey, this is inappropriate behavior for a young lady. Kissing boys leads to promiscuity, and that leads to... um... ahh," William had started the sentence well, but couldn't seem to finish, especially with Gayle eyeing him.

She was obviously enjoying this, but he persevered, "And that could lead to bad things... improper things."

Gayle cocked an eyebrow at him and then turned away to hide her smile. Katie however, had the proper attitude. She saw that daddy was using his stern face and commanding voice, so she immediately brought forth her corresponding sad face with a complementary contrite tone.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I don't think I meant it. I think it was an accident. What does promise-too-ity mean?" William could see that she was trying to cute her way out of trouble.

Gayle turned back to him, this time with both eyebrows raised and a slight smile, it was an *Oh please, do tell what promise-too-ity means, I can't wait*, kind of look.

"First off, you don't accidentally kiss a boy. Second the word is promiscuity and it means... ah," William refused to look at Gayle, but with his peripheral vision saw her eyebrows edge up slightly. "It means it's bad to go around kissing lots of boys."

He glanced at his wife, her face now told him, *Eh not bad, could have been better*. William was in the middle of giving her a, *It was fine* face with a slight head nod for emphasis when Katie showed him it wasn't fine.

"But I didn't kiss lots of boys! It was just one boy, I kissed lots of times," she explained. "And Miss Canaday is a snitch and the meanest teacher ever, she hates me! And I don't think I am being a promise-cute-ity neither!" She said this last bit with arms crossed and a small stamp of her foot.

"Listen, its prom-es-cu..." he started to explain the proper pronunciation when Gayle interrupted.

"I think we're done trying to teach our *six-year-old* that word," Gayle said to William, her face giving him a look that agreed with the statement, maybe even a bit more so. "Katie honey, no more kissing at school." This time it was William

whose eyebrows shot up and Gayle continued quickly, "I mean you're too young to be kissing at all, so cut it out. Another thing, Miss Canaday is not a snitch and isn't the meanest teacher ever."

Now, William was glad to hear that Miss Canaday was back to being *The Best Teacher Ever*. He certainly appreciated a teacher who would go out of her way to call over something as simple as that.

The drizzle started to fall just a little heavier and William opened up his black umbrella. He almost called Katie over, but she was practicing her ballet in the rain and she was too precious to interrupt.

She suddenly looked like her mother. With her little hood thrown back, the rain had darkened her hair and the braids resembled the way Gayle had kept hers when she had danced. She'd been very good once and Gayle still kept her figure slim and tone. Katie almost never looked like her mom, but it was these little moments when she did that he liked the most. She was normally the cutest thing on two legs, but every so often, he would catch a glimpse of the beautiful woman she would become and he'd glow with pride.

"Daddy, my school is that way," she said interrupting his thinking. She pointed down Clayton Road, the direction they normally took to her school.

"I know dear, but I wanted to swing by our new home and find out how the work is progressing. You can see your new bedroom," he added as an inducement.

"I like my room now, with Tal. And we don't want to move," Katie said this as she leapt a very large puddle, just barely clearing it. "Tal wants to stay in my room with me, and we don't know anyone way over here, and all my friends are back at the apartment."

William expected this. "There are lots of nice children who live in this area. I see them all of the time when I'm at work." He pointed up at a window in the three-story brick building they were walking next to. "Do you see that window?"

Her blue eyes blinking into the rain, Katie said, "Uh-huh"

"That's my office where I work and right over there is our new house." William pointed across a large oak-tree lined grassy park at a row of brick houses.

Katie squinted at the house, her tiny nose wrinkling. "I don't like it. And Tal doesn't like it. It's so dark and red and we only like houses that are white with blue window thingies," she explained.

"Thingies? Do you mean shutters or drapes?"

"Are the shutters on the outside or the inside?" Katie asked. She stood in front of the largest puddle yet, contemplating.

"The *shutters* are on the outside. And Katherine." When her daddy used her full name and his commanding voice, it meant pay attention. She paused just as she was getting ready for her run up to the puddle and looked up at him. "Don't try to jump that puddle. You won't make it across and you will get those pretty shoes all wet."

She looked down at her little black shoes and Minnie Mouse looked back up at her. "Hmm," she said now eyeing the puddle. One more glance at her shoes and she skipped around it; Minnie's input must have helped. "Well Tal definitely doesn't like the house, unless she can stay in my room with me and even then I'm sure she doesn't like it."

"Talitha has already seen the house and has told me she approves of it." A minute later, as they walked up to it, William pointed again. "Do you see that window over the porch? That's your room, and if you look," he faced back to the building across the park. "There's my office. If you ever get lonely or scared, you can just wave to me."

Katie brightened at the idea and ran to the brick porch and up the stairs. Looking back, doubt swept across her face. "Are you sure you can see that far?" she asked. "It's kinda far and you're getting really old."

"What? I'm only forty-one. Where do you get the idea I'm getting too old to see that far?" William climbed the stairs and looked back, squinting. He was that old it seemed. The window was plainly visible, but he didn't think he would be able to see her little arm from there.

Katie, still looking at the window across the way, replied, "You said it right after you wrestled with Willy J. You said, *I must be getting old* and you have glasses; I have seen them by your bed. And you have grey hair. And that makes you old," she explained. "Grandpa is really, really old, but I think you're only really, kinda old."

William was in great shape; he ran five miles a day and lifted weights three times a week. He played in a basketball league with men half his age and routinely left them in his dust. He was about to explain this to his daughter, but the idea of defending his physical abilities to a six-year-old, well... made him feel old. Besides, she had a point. "You could flick your lights on and off as a sign," he suggested.

"You won't see them in the daytime and that's when you work," Katie enlightened him patiently.

Now in addition to old, he could add stupid to how he felt. "You're pretty smart, you know that?" he said. She smiled and nodded in agreement. He continued, "How about this. If you're lonely you could put your blue blanket in the window and if you're scared you, ah... put your red jacket in the window. I can see those easy."

"That's a good idea. You are kinda smart too, Daddy," she said still smiling happily up at him.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." After a pause she asked, "Is there room for my bike here?"

He climbed down from the porch. "Of course. That," he said pointing to the left side of the house, "over there, is the garage and it will fit the car and the bikes." Her bike, along with most of their belongings was currently in a large storeroom.

Their last place was a spacious four bedroom suburban house; their "home" now was an eight hundred square foot apartment. It was so tiny that he and his wife were sleeping on his son's old bed, since their king sized one didn't fit in what was laughably called the master suite. Their heavy leather couches that were purchased fourteen months ago at great expense, lay under boxes and boxes of dishes and clothes and who knows what else.

They'd come to Governors Island, expecting one of the nice colonial homes only to be told that the house they had been promised had been given to a higher ranking officer. With no other houses available they had no choice, but to move into one of the four apartment buildings on the island.

There they lived cramped, tremendously so, with no end in sight, until an unfortunate event occurred. A vacancy on Colonel's Row came about when illness befell the wife of Commander Steve Nelson; this had forced their entire family to move. It was sad for the Nelsons, but the Jerns were going to finally get some much-needed space.

The Nelsons had moved out ten weeks previous and the Jerns were starting to get antsy, especially Gayle. Their move in date, delayed three times already, was the reason why Commander Jern was at the house again. He was there to see what, if anything had been done on the very short list of repairs.

Looking back up at the house, it was obvious nobody was currently working on it. The windows were black and impenetrable; they seemed to glare down at him. In fact, from the sidewalk the house appeared to lean forward imposingly.

Mounting the steps, he worked his key into the lock and stepped inside.

3

The place was quiet as a tomb, and as cold as one—William was amazed to be able to see his breath. It felt close to freezing inside the house.

Snapping on the entire bank of light switches in the foyer, he went first to the thermostat and saw that the setting was at its coldest. He cranked it all the way over and waited, listening.

"Come on, Daddy! Let's go see my room!" Katie tried to tug him into the living room.

"Just a second," he murmured, feeling an unusual need to be as quiet. The house was so silent that on a subconscious level the least noise grated on him. "Let's take off our shoes... so we don't make a mess of these pretty floors."

Katie was all too happy to slip off her Minnie Mouse shoes and once in her stockings, she did a quick pirouette and almost scampered off again, but he held her back.

"Not yet," he said in a hushed tone. Fervently he hoped the pilot light to the boiler was still lit. On his last visit, he had to light it himself and that had been a strangely upsetting experience. In order to light the boiler, he had to lie down in front of it and stick his arm deep within. It felt like he was reaching into a great mouth and he had the feeling that at any moment, it would bite down.

He didn't know much about boilers, but the insides of this one, felt unnecessarily pointy and sharp, which only added to the illusion of a tooth-filled mouth. It gave him the shivers, like someone had walked over his grave.

From somewhere upstairs, came a sudden loud bang. Then another sound, like a hammer striking thick metal came from the direction of the dining room. Even though he knew the sounds were coming, he jumped and the muscles of his back and chest tightened.

"What's that?" Katie asked with a touch of mild alarm.

"Don't worry, it's normal," he said, relaxing. "We have radiators here and they always make this kind of ruckus when heating up."

The explanation calmed her fears and she dashed off, sliding across the glossy hardwood floors into the living room. It was a large room and it contained the best feature in the house.

A wide curving staircase that descended from the second floor in a great sweep. The banister was hand crafted out of a dark, rich wood and inlaid with beautiful leaf patterns. The staircase made the room feel significant and William imagined throwing parties here.

In his mind's eye, he could easily envision Gayle, slowly, elegantly descending it. Every head in the room would look up at her, as she gracefully moved down. Smiled at the image he went deeper into the room. With it empty the fireplace seemed to dominate it. Its mantle was over five feet tall and nearly four feet wide. The fireplace itself was very deep and made from the same dark red brick as the exterior of the house. It seemed well used and William pictured how the room would look with a roaring fire.

Katie didn't pause to picture anything and moved through the archway separating the dining room from the living room. The dining room contained an equally impressive fireplace and little else. There was a door at the other end of the room, which led to a small hallway containing a pantry, a bathroom, and the kitchen.

"Katie Honey, your room is this way." William pointed back toward the staircase. She had gained the kitchen but turned on the spot and ran back. As she sped into the living room, she braked purposefully and slid on her stockinged feet a good ten feet. Oddly, the noise of the radiators seemed to stop just as she began her slide, so that the only sound in the house was the almost silent, long swwwisshh of her feet on the wood. The sound seemed to stretch out and there was an expectancy about it, as if some small event would occur when she finished sliding.

She stood there with her arms out from her sides, still in her sliding stance. Her head cocked to the side listening and a big smile lit up her face. William smiled and was about to tell her, "Good slide," but the words stuck in his throat, as if he didn't want to be the first one to break the silence. It was like a voice inside his head said, "Sshhh."

After a long moment, Katie asked, "Did you see that, Daddy?" As if right on cue, the radiators began banging away again.

"I did. It was very impressive, you should be in the Olympics," William responded, but quietly, speaking in low tones as though he didn't want to disturb something with his loud voice. He walked up to her and snatched her off her feet, and carried her to the stairs.

"Can I slide down this... this... thing?" she asked pointing to the banister as he climbed the stairs.

"It's called a banister and I guess so. You'll have to go down on your tummy until you get older." William refused to treat his girls like china dolls.

They reached the second floor and he put her down. The second story of the home had a long hallway that ran completely through it. To William's left, the hallway went about twenty-five feet before it ended at the back staircase. There were only two doors on the left; the first was the bathroom that Talitha and Katie would share. The next door opened practically onto the landing of the back stairs and was to be Talitha's room.

Directly in front of him was the family room and just to the right, the hallway only ran another ten feet. It ended with the door to Katie's room on the right and the master bedroom on the left.

"This one can't be mine," she said looking into the family room, which was windowless and boxy. The wall-to-wall, red carpeting seemed to absorb the light from the single bulb in the fixture. It was the dimmest room in the house and when Gayle first saw it, she eyed the red carpet as if it had personally offended her. He smiled at the memory of their first trip to the house, two months ago. "Are we allowed to rip it out?" Gayle had asked then.

"Only if we replace it," he had replied.

"What if it happens to have a very unfortunate 'accident?' I was thinking about taking up smoking, you know."

William was just considering that he might surprise his wife by ripping the carpet out one these days when Katie ran into the room and turned a nice cartwheel.

"I like the carpet. Does my room have this kinda carpet too?"

"No. Your room is right... here." William walked over and opened the door to her new room. She ran to it, but stopped in the doorway as if she wanted to take it all in before entering. There wasn't much to take in; it was a dinky eight by ten.

William tried to mentally describe the room and it was odd but he considered it sweet or nice. With two windows that took up the entire south wall it was easily the brightest room in the house. Added to this was deep shag carpeting in a very light yellow and bright white walls.

"Wow!" Katie's eyes were huge; she bent down and felt the carpet. "Daddy, feel this. It's really soft." Pulling her socks off, she walked about in the deep carpet. She stopped in front of him, looking down at her feet, as her tiny toes curled and uncurled in the shag.

Remembering suddenly, she turned and ran to the window. Peering through it, she cried, "I can see your office! It's right through those trees, right?"

William came over and bent down. "Yes that's it. Do you like your room?"

"I do. I like it a lot but Talitha won't fit in here, will she? She's going to be sad, not sharing a room any more. Can I not go to school today? I need to plan where all my stuff is going to go. When are we moving in? On-a-cuz I think we should move in pretty soon." Katie seemed excited.

"You're going to school today. And I don't know when we're moving, soon I hope. I'm going to check on some repairs and if you want to start planning, go right ahead." William headed for the doorway.

As he walked down the hallway, he heard Katie say, "Poor Tal, she'll be so lonely." In truth, Talitha couldn't wait for a little loneliness. Katie drove her sister up the wall with her constant talking. A typical conversation would sound like this:

Talitha: "Katie, I'm trying to read, can you quiet down for a while?"

Katie: "Sure, Tal." In a whisper, "Is this how quiet you want to me to be?"

Talitha: "How about you just don't talk at all?"

Katie: "Ok, I can do that. Mmh, mmh, MMH, MMhghm!"

Talitha: "And no humming."

Katie: "You heard that?" In a whisper, "Can you hear this? Ta-lee-tha?"

Talitha: "MOM!"

4

William headed for the basement, thankful that Katie was staying upstairs for the moment. One of things he wanted to check on was a picture that one of the Nelson's kids had drawn on a wall. It was unpleasant and he didn't want Katie to see it.

He went down the backstairs through the kitchen to the basement door, but stopped, feeling a note of anger rising in him. He'd seen this on his earlier visits: someone had put a hasp and combination padlock on the door.

It was annoying. There wasn't any need to have it there in the first place and yet someone kept locking the thing up. Shaking his head, he began to work the shiny new lock, not having to remember the combination, which was written in pencil directly above the hasp.

It was pointless and he wasn't a fan of pointless things.

The basement had a long hallway with five rooms off it, two on each side and one at the end. Just to his left was the boiler room and despite the thing roaring away mightily, the room was cold. William stepped in and inspected the device.

The boiler had been one of the key issues keeping them from moving in and he happily noted that it was brand new. It seemed to be a huge improvement over the last one, which had gaping holes where it had rusted through, while this was shiny and looked state of the art.

William checked that off his mental list.

He then went to the big room at the end of the hall.

"Damn."

The picture, or mural he supposed it actually should have been called, was still there; it hadn't been painted over. It was evidence of some sort of psychosis or neurosis—he could never tell what any of those high falutin words really meant. He did know that a happy well-adjusted kid didn't draw the picture. It was about four feet high and seven feet long, and in a sick sort of way, it was very well done.

It depicted some kind of black, two-headed monster, standing over a dead person, a little girl by the looks of it. The girl looked to have died in extreme agony, her head twisted around at an odd angle. It was the monster that fascinated him. One of the monster's heads was sticking out of its chest and was so well drawn, it looked three-dimensional. Using only crayons, the kid who drew it, captured incredible movement and emotion.

Unfortunately, the emotion captured was a sick, heavy fear. That's what William felt at least as he peered closer. He noticed now that someone, probably the artist kid, had scratched viciously at the face of one of the monster's heads. The fingernail marks went clear through the crayon, and the underlying paint beneath and then into the drywall.

"Damn," he said again, practically whispering it. He gazed a long time at the picture when he noticed there was a little bit of blood in the gouge marks. On impulse, he glanced to the floor under the mural and saw there what he didn't want to see.

Two fingernails.

Not ones that had been snipped off or even chewed off in nervousness, but ones that had been ripped off. He bent down and saw there was black crayon under the shredded remains of the tops of the nails, and that a small amount of skin and dried blood were still attached to the undersides.

He stood up quickly, feeling suddenly nauseous, and that was when he heard someone walking around in the kitchen. Whoever it was, wasn't trying to be quiet. The footsteps thumped heavily as if caused by work-boots, so that he thought it might be a painter coming to cover over the mural.

For a brief second, William felt like calling out.

However, something inside warned him to remain quiet and a sudden cold chill ran up his spine. The chill was literal; the temperature of the room dropped at once, as if someone had just opened a freezer door behind him.

Presently, the sound of the heavy tread neared the basement door and William suddenly realized he'd left the lock sitting on the counter next to it. Worried about being locked in accidentally, he made to call out to the owner of the boots, but his throat tightened as he heard the door swing shut with a deafening, quiet click.

Chapter 3

The Painter. May 10, 1980

1

When William heard the door shut, he felt one of the strangest feelings in his life: panic.

He was not a man prone to fear. He felt fear like everyone else, but he'd always been able to control it, burying it beneath his sense of duty. To command a Coast Guard Cutter in the midst of the most ferocious of storms meant that he must first command himself. He prided himself on his ability to conquer his fear and that was why he was so shocked when he stood in mute panic.

The feeling of being trapped was so overwhelming, that he froze in place for a span of seconds, scarcely breathing. However, the spell was broken when he heard the work-boots moving away, toward the backstairs.

Katie!

Throwing off his panic, he sprinted for the basement stairs and ran up them two at a time. At the top, the door was shut against him. Was it locked?

The door is too thick, you'll never break it down, a voice inside his head said.

That was very true. Everything about the house was well made and quite sturdy. Hesitantly he reached out and turned the knob—it came open easily.

An embarrassing sigh of relief escaped him. "Man," he whispered.

How had he let his fears run away with him? It wasn't like him.

"Hello," he called out self-consciously, as if the person who had shut the door knew of his fright. There was no answer and what's more, the footsteps seemed to have stopped altogether.

"Hello!" This time he raised his considerable voice and an echo came in back to him. Again there was only silence, not even a peep from Katie.

The thought of her sent a jangle of alarm through him and now he sprinted at a dead run up the backstairs to her room. When he reached the hallway that ran down the center of the house, he saw her door stood shut.

The alarm within him slid very close to panic and he ran down the hall so quick he could feel wind in his ears. At her door, he didn't hesitate and threw it open, taking in the whole room in a single glance.

"Hi, Daddy." Katie's voice was calm, but she had a startled look in her eyes.

The room was empty save for his little girl. William spun about looking down the hall and listening to the sounds of the house—there came only the banging of the radiators.

"Are you ok?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, I am... didn't you hear me calling?"

"Yeah, you were saying hello."

"Then why didn't you answer?" That seemed like the reasonable thing to have done and he began to feel a little cross at her for... for what? Assisting in scaring him?

"Were you calling for me?" she asked, but didn't wait for his answer. "I didn't think you were, on-a-cuz when you do, you say KAY-DEE!" Her little voice went as deep as it could, which was actually surprisingly deep.

"You're right, that's what I say," he responded, rubbing his head in puzzlement. "Did you hear anyone or see anyone?" he asked as casually as he could, not wanting to scare her, especially now after she seemed happy to be moving in.

"Nope... will my dresser fit against this wall?" she inquired with her hands on her nonexistent hips, looking exactly like her mom in miniature.

Had there been someone in the house at all? It seemed suddenly empty. With a mental shrug William gave the wall a quick glance and eyeballed the measurement, "It'll fit."

"Really? The dresser is pretty big."

"No, you're just so small that everything looks big to you." He heard another noise then, coming from the attic, but thought it likely to be one of the radiators banging again.

"I'm going to check a few more things and then we have to get you to school."

She began to give him a look that suggested she knew of another reason she should stay home from school, but he squelched it with a simple, "No."

2

He left her scheming, trying to find a realistic excuse, and went into the master bedroom, hoping a handyman had fixed the loose bricks in the fireplace. They wiggled under his fingers.

Right behind his forehead, he felt a headache coming on.

As a greater hint to the workers, he pulled the bricks out and set them on the mantle. Out of frustration he considered making a little building with them, but decided instead that when he got to his office, he'd put a call into Lieutenant James Andre and tear a good size chunk out of his ass. The boiler was good, but some of the easier fixes should've been done weeks ago.

Clunk.

The small sound had William's full attention. It came from the attic. After a quick peek in at his daughter, he slipped down the hall as quietly as his two-hundred plus pounds would allow and made his way up the stairs. Here, there was no sense trying to be quiet; the stairs creaked loudly with his every step and besides, there was no way out of the attic.

The layout of the attic was simple: two storage rooms to the left and right at the beginning of a long hallway. At the end of the hall were two bedrooms and a bathroom. That was it.

At the top of the stairs, he paused listening, but no sound came and after a moment, he glanced into both the storage rooms and found them empty. The same was true of the bedrooms, he even checked the closets. He was just thinking that the 'clunk' sound must have been the radiators, when he heard the first scream.

"Ayyyyee!"

William froze for the barest instant and then raced along the hall. In a second, he flew down the stairs pausing at the landing to look toward Katie's room.

It was empty.

"Ayyyyee!"

Another scream came from the kitchen. William took two giant leaps down the back staircase and was in the kitchen in a flash. What he found astonished him: little Katie standing calmly over a man lying on the floor.

The man, who appeared to be a painter, looked from Katie to William with a terrified expression on his face. He had both hands in front of him, palms out, as if to protect himself from William's forty-pound daughter.

William stepped between Katie and the man. "Hey! Calm down now!" he yelled. "What's going on here?"

The man blinked rapidly a few times and said, "I uh, I uh." He took a few breathes to calm himself. "I'm ok, I'm ok." He waved his hands to show that he was ok. William first thought the man was a lunatic, but the more he looked at him however, the more he thought *drug addict*.

"Ok, ok... wow... I'm sorry, I really am," the painter said.

"Is he a retardo, Daddy?" Katie asked unexpectedly. "He's kinda like Arnold Frimley and Arnold is a big retardo." The man looked at Katie with surprise.

"The proper term is 'retarded', Katie," William explained, and wondered if the man was indeed a bit soft. "But it's impolite to make such assumptions, however."

"No, no, I'm not retarded," the man said. He got to his feet. "I'm real sorry. I didn't think anyone was here is all, and she," he pointed at Katie. "Scared the hel...I mean she frightened me very badly. She came out of nowhere." He glanced over at William in a slightly fearful way and William realized he was still scowling fiercely at the man.

The Commander softened his features, but only by a little. "That's hardly a good enough excuse to go about scaring little girls."

He stepped forward and eyed the man, trying to get a sense if he was on drugs or was really just afraid. The painter was a small man and wore an all white outfit. Overalls, jacket and painter cap were all white, and each had many layers of white paint on them. He was exceedingly speckled with paint, yet under all of it he had the Mediterranean tan of a Greek or as an Italian.

"I wasn't afraid," Katie piped up. She was spinning a padlock absently minded in her small hands. "He was afraid of me!" She giggled at this. Then a new idea came to her. "Maybe you're a spaz! Do you think you might be one?" she asked the painter.

His expression of embarrassed relief changed at the question and he glanced over at William in a perplexed manner.

"Katherine!" William said sternly. "You're being insulting. Please apologize to the gentleman, right now."

Katie looked very contrite. "I'm sorry, I asked if you were a spaz and a retardo...I mean a retarded...and I'm sorry that I scared you so bad."

The painter gave her a smile. "That's ok. I'm the one who should be apologizing to you and to your dad." The painter's manner now seemed completely normal. Maybe he had been just afraid.

"I suppose it happens," William said.

Whatever had just occurred was definitely odd. Most people when shocked like that would jump back a little and maybe make a little frightened noise, but this was different. The man had screamed! There was a long pause; William had no idea what to say to a man who behaved like that.

The painter's embarrassment continued. "Are you with Vendor Management? I was just getting an early start you know." William looked puzzled. The painter explained, "I'm David, with Papa's Painters."

"Of course, you're with one of the work crews," William said. "We aren't with Vendor Management; this is going to be our house." The man looked to Katie quickly and then back to William. It was obvious he wanted to say something and he opened his mouth to start, but then shut it. William found himself getting frustrated with this odd man.

"You're a worker man?" Katie practically jumped with excitement. "Can I have my shutters blue, please?"

"This house doesn't have shutters, little Miss," David responded.

"Well, you can put them on. I want mine to go on the outside, right Daddy?" David smiled in an unusually sad fashion at Katie and shook his head, no.

"Katie, we won't be getting shutters on this house, sorry," William said to her, but then turned to David. "Why were you so afraid anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know, I guess I'm just jumpy," David's answer was clearly a lie and the Commander wasn't the sort of man you lied to.

"Katie, go wait on the porch. I'll be right there," his tone was kindly toward his daughter, but when she left his face turned stony. "Now, before I get angry, try answering my question again, truthfully."

The answer the painter gave him, made his headache rev its engines and it was all William could do not to punch the man.

"Your house is haunted," David intoned with wide eyes.

Chapter 4

Will.

May 26 1980

1

"Hey, Willy J," Amy Harris purred seductively. Sometimes the island was just too small for his liking, Will thought.

"Oh hi, Amy." He'd be polite but nothing more; anything else would be an invitation for her to follow him all the way to Lisa's apartment building. Lisa wouldn't be happy about that.

Amy had appeared out of nowhere and in fact, had given him a bit of a fright. One second he was walking next to a parked van, the next she was pressing her almost impossibly large breasts onto his arm.

"So Willy J where you off to?" She put both of her hands into her thick brown hair and teased it. This pulled her sweater even tighter across her chest and she knew it.

Will Jern prided himself on being a gentleman and did his best to look away and was mostly successful. She was difficult not to look at, but she always made it easier by calling him Willy J. The nickname grated on him.

"I gotta date with Lisa. So if you don't mind, I'm late and I really gotta go."

She pouted for just a second and then smiled with insincere sweetness. "Maybe next time then, see ya Willy J."

He had got off surprisingly easy. Normally getting rid of her was like scraping gum off his shoe. Giving her a small wave, he slipped quickly between the parked cars.

There had been a time when he had honestly thought about giving Amy a whirl. She was gorgeous and back then he hadn't known about her well-deserved reputation. Thankfully for him, she had insisted on using the name Willy J at every opportunity despite him asking her not to. Will hated the name. He was ok with his full name William Jern Junior, it was that damn nickname, Willy J that really burned him up inside.

When the Jerns had first moved to Governor's Island a little over year before, he'd tried desperately to lose the nickname and become "Will." He had pleaded with his family for their help and his father and sister Talitha were willing, but his mom had trouble letting go.

"I love the name Willy J. You've been Willy J since you were a baby," she said during dinner that night, their second night on the island. He had hung his head and played with his mashed potatoes.

"Honey, you're going to have to let it go," his father intervened, cutting into his food. "Willy J is almost... I'm sorry, *Will* is almost seventeen, and Willy J is just not a name for a man." Will's father understood at least and the talk of him becoming a man, made Will sit up a little taller in his chair.

"I think Willy J is an ok name for a man, that is if you live in a trailer," Talitha had said and then giggled. "Remember that guy, Jerry-Jim what's-his-name, in Mobile? Bet yawl diddy con doit. Yawl gonna scritch your beehind," she drawled out her best Jerry-Jim impersonation and this set them all to laughing.

"Scratch your beehind!" Katie's impersonation wasn't so good, but she made up for it with exuberance and a quick pantomime. Hopping up on her chair, she started scratching at her skinny five-year-old bottom madly. They were all laughing hard and there were tears in Gayle's eyes.

"All right Katie, have a seat," William cautioned. Katie overplayed it as she always did. If one bottom scratch brought a laugh, then ten must be ten times as funny.

"Alright, Daddy," she said standing on her chair, delicately rubbing her little bottom now. "That was starting to hurt." This brought on another gale of laughter and Katie realized her time on stage wasn't over with yet. "Yeah it really hurts, Mommy. Can you kiss it better?" she asked putting her bottom in her mom's face.

Little Katie was a natural and could say and do things that would have got Will in big trouble. His father was strict, but Katie just had a way about her. Gayle gave her bottom a playful slap and tugged her down into her chair.

That had been their first week on Governor's Island and he had been Will for only the next three. All it took was one slip of the tongue and he was back to being Willy J.

Quite by accident, Talitha let it slip. The two of them were at the community pool with some of their new friends when it happened. Will decided to splash a sunbathing Talitha and out it popped.

"Hey, Willy J! Stop it," she groused angrily, but realized her mistake immediately. The moment seemed to drag out for the two of them as they looked at each other.

And then it started.

Amy Harris, who had a huge crush on him from the moment he first stepped foot on the island sang out, "Willy J, that's so cute! Is that what they call you at home?"

It was all downhill from there. Talitha felt terrible, and tried to correct anyone who used the nickname but it was a useless battle. For his part, he forgave her quickly since it was an obvious accident and he loved her all the more, seeing her repeated attempts at bringing back *Will*.

"Hello *Will*," she would say loudly and importantly and for some reason with a slightly deeper voice than her normal one. "Are you done with the comics, *Will*? Say *Will*, what do you think about those Mets, *Will*?"

Finally, a week later, when Willy J seemed to have been carved in stone, he'd asked her to give it up. Talitha stopped being so obvious about it, but she never called him Willy J again. Katie and his mom however continued to use the nickname. His mom figured if everyone else got to call him Willy J, then she should be able to as well. And Katie was five years old; she didn't need any other reason. His father, who either went by William or Commander Jern, rarely changed his mind on anything, so he continued to call him Will.

The only other person, who called him Will, was Lisa Kawalski.

It was oddly enough, one of the reasons he was initially attracted to her. Will was tall, athletic, and handsome. He had his mother's thick brown hair and his father's blue eyes and he knew that he could have his pick of the girls on the Island. Lisa was not the obvious first choice. She was pretty, but not strikingly so and there had been some real beauties who had made their affections very clear to him.

It was just the simple way Lisa said, "Hello, Will" that caused him to look at her in a different light. It stood out in stark contrast to all the other girls squealing, "Hey, Willy J."

She was calm and direct and it lent her an air of maturity and seductiveness that played on him. Lisa was small and athletically slim with dirty blonde hair. Her best feature were her green eyes; they always caught people's attention. Lisa enjoyed that moment when first meeting people, when they would pause and stare into them. They changed her somewhat average face into something closer to beautiful.

Now with June almost upon them, the two had been going out for a year. Actually, just three weeks shy of a year and there was a significance to the date that a number of people thought him oblivious to. Will could be oblivious to a great many things. It wasn't that he lacked smarts; he was just a daydreamer of the highest order. If he wasn't playing football or kissing Lisa, he was likely not paying very close attention to the world going on around him. It was in fact the reason why he was currently hurrying along the seawall late for his date.

Time had slipped away from him once again. His bedroom window had a wonderful view of New York Harbor and sometimes it was all he could do to pull himself away from the sight. It wasn't the tall buildings or the lights of the city that drew him, it was the amazing number and variety of ships that swept by.

Hundreds a day, came through the harbor and they reached out and touched something within him. He had been looking out on a two-masted schooner strutting about, showing off the plumage of its beautiful white sails. In his mind, he was out on its yardarm, drifting up and down with the light seas, letting the glow of the evening sun warm him, when a voice interrupted his daydreaming.

"What are you still doing here?" He jumped as if bitten and Talitha gave him a smile. "Aren't you supposed to be somewhere?"

"What do you mean? What time is it?" he asked suddenly worried.

"It's time you learned how to read a clock. I won't always be here you know, so one of these days you're going to have to start relying on yourself." Talitha had a beautiful smile even when she poked fun. "One more time... when the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the seven it means you are late for your date."

"Seven! Oh man!" He hopped up quick and darted from the room.

"I think you forgot to say thank you," she called after him, "and I think you forgot your wallet as well."

He was back in a flash, and kissing her on the cheek, said, "Thanks." Will grabbed his wallet but remembered his money was actually in the jeans he wore the previous day. As he searched through the mess of his room he asked, "So do you and Brian have a hot date as well?"

"Oh yes. We're going to the library. He seems to believe in the silly notion that hypnosis can be an occurrence completely separate from autohypnosis. It's my conjecture that... what are you doing?"

"I can't find the jeans I wore yesterday, my money was in them."

"You didn't wear jeans yesterday; you wore your brown cords. Remember, you spilled jelly on them at breakfast and thought no one would notice, but everyone did. They're right there." She sighed heavily reminding Will of their mom. "You're going to have to work on this self reliance."

"I will, I promise. See ya." He was gone again thinking she was probably right.

He did tend to lean on his little sister for help. In school, he relied heavily on her. They were in the same grade and when they could, they always tried to share classes.

Will hadn't been held back due to grades, he'd just been born too late in the school year while Talitha had been born a month premature and only ten months after him. That meant he was always one of the oldest kids in their class and she the youngest.

They were both very smart, but Talitha actually used her brain scholastically and during test time, she'd take two tests at once. Her eyes darting back and forth from her work to Will's and if she ever made even the slightest noise, he would quickly change his last answer.

Will thought Talitha was beautiful, but he knew that she didn't see herself that way. She saw herself as bookish, nerdy, and shy. There was no denying the bookish part, since the girl read two or three books at a time constantly. She wasn't nerdy either, but rather frightfully smart with a very quick, funny and sometimes biting wit that left most boys her age feeling stupid and lost.

And lastly, she wasn't shy, but instead quiet. She listened to those speaking around her and only spoke when she thought she could contribute to a conversation meaningfully. However, since she considered most of what her peers talked about inane, she tended to listen more than she spoke.

Will knew other boys thought her to be pretty as well. Talitha always looked to have just come from the beach, sporting a warm golden tan year round. Her straight hair was a dark brown that matched her eyes and she had high cheekbones, a small slim nose, and full lips. She never wore make up and never appeared to need to, but despite all this, Talitha considered herself plain. Will valued her opinion on all matters, except for her opinion of herself.

Part of why she didn't find herself attractive was that she was so seldom asked out.

Will tried to explain the logic boys used: asking a girl out was tough—asking a pretty girl out was even tougher—asking a pretty girl out who was not only smart as a whip, but also seemed to enjoy cracking the whip was just not worth the effort.

"And you believe I enjoy cracking the whip?" she had asked. "When have I ever cracked this metaphorical whip?"

"Yes, you enjoy cracking the whip," he replied. "Remember Danny McIand? And another thing, more boys might ask you out if you didn't sound like a walking dictionary all the time. You're sixteen! Try talking like a teenager for once. By the way, what do you mean by metaphysical whip? And don't tell me to look it up!"

"I was being figurative," Talitha explained without explaining anything. "And it's not my fault that Danny McLand can't string two words together intelligently... uh, uh, Ta, Ta-lee-tha, uh, uh, douwannna, uh, uh, douwannna, uh," she mimicked.

"He was nervous! It's not easy asking out a girl, you know." Will became exasperated, "How many of the other guys do you think wanted to ask you out when they heard that you responded back to him in Chinese?"

"It was Cantonese and it was the only eighteen words I know. I was just trying to demonstrate that it's impolite to speak in a language that the listener doesn't understand," Talitha justified.

"You're being obtuse. The point is no guy wants to be shot down as well as made fun of."

Talitha sighed heavily and Will could see that she was considering the points he had made. She suddenly brightened up and said with a mischievous smile, "You looked up obtuse didn't you? I knew you would."

That was the only time that Will had tried to help her romantically, while he on the other hand, seemed always in need of help. In early December, he'd been completely surprised when Talitha asked him if he was ready for the big day.

"Christmas? I think I'm ready to open presents if that's what you mean." They were in their *Dining Room* doing homework. Their dining room consisted of their living room, only with the TV turned off and their folding card table opened out.

"No. I'm talking of your big day with Lisa," Talitha said with a knowing look. The look bewildered her brother.

"I have time to get her something still, Christmas is like three weeks away. But that reminds me, can you help me pick something out and can I borrow a little money?"

"Not Christmas. Your six month anniversary." She shook her head in disbelief.

"That's a thing?" He managed to look panicked, angry, frustrated, and lost all at once. "What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to get her a present? Do you even think she knows it's almost our... six month... wait." He stopped in mid sentence while he tried to figure out if it really was almost six months. "It's close I guess."

"What do you mean you guess? You don't know when you asked her out?" Talitha closed her textbook, so he knew this was getting serious.

"Sure, it was ah, like a few weeks after we moved in... the first week or two of June, right?" Will started to get a nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Try June 15th and she definitely knows the date. You should get her a small present and maybe some flowers." Talitha had a slight dreamy look about her.

Their mom was eight feet away in the kitchen and said, "I don't think you should make a big deal of this Willy J. You might be setting yourself up, you know."

"In what manner would he be setting himself up?" Talitha had an odd way of asking the questions that Will was just thinking of, and she sometimes seemed to speak as if she was his attorney.

"I'm just saying if he begins his relationship by spoiling her, where will it lead to?" their mother asked. "He'll have to constantly top the last 'big day' and that can get expensive." Despite holding a spatula in one hand and an oven mitt in the other, she still managed to put air quotes around big day.

The nervous feeling slid toward fear. He never seemed to have very much money and his mom using the word expensive had Will thinking she was winning the argument.

Talitha wasn't done yet however. "I think he should spoil her and she should spoil him right back. This is what people do when they're in love. Doesn't dad spoil you? And I'm not talking anything expensive, even a card if it contains the right message, will be sufficient."

Will liked the idea of getting Lisa a card, but only since it was in his price range. He was never partial to giving a card as a gift; it felt weird using someone else's words to try to describe how he felt. Besides, he really didn't know what he felt.

2

Eventually, Will went with the card Talitha picked out for him. It was a wise choice as most of her choices were and Lisa almost cried, but in a good way. His mom had been right about one thing, he subconsciously felt the need to top the small gift at Christmas. So he went with a sweater and another card.

Then came Valentine's Day and the word love was thrown around far too casually for Will's liking. Lisa talked frequently of love and started saying that she loved him, and he felt forced to say the word back. But he honestly didn't know if he loved her or not and despite what Talitha and everyone else thought, he was painfully aware that their one year anniversary was coming up.

They seemed to be at a crossroads in their relationship. Up to now, he had been having fun, enjoying the time they spent together but never worrying about or even considering their future. He didn't want anything to change and bringing in love with all its attendant responsibilities was a huge change and one he didn't think he was ready for.

Lisa, on the other hand, seemed to love him with all of her heart, which only made him feel worse.

Will felt like he stood at a tipping point and that if he became unbalanced in some way, he'd either slide deeply in love with her forever or else end the relationship painfully. He was afraid either way. He didn't think he could break up with her, because he knew it would hurt her too badly. At the same time, if he let go and embraced her with all of his heart, then what?

Would he be next in line to be married?

Was he going to become whipped as his friends joked and stop being himself and start being "Lisa's Boyfriend?" Was he going to miss out on all the fun and let life pass him by? He started to feel that he was too immature to be in love.

The immaturity however was strictly emotional.

Physically, his body made great demands on him. He felt an urgent need to be with her sexually and it started to dominate his thinking when he was with her. She, on the other hand wasn't ready for sex. But, she wasn't prudish either and they had done their fair share of necking and fooling around. Of course, that just made it harder on Will when she told him to stop.

All of this zipped through his mind as he half-walked, half-ran around the sea wall to where they were supposed to meet. Lisa lived in the smallest and most

rundown of the islands four apartment buildings, something his mom pointed out repeatedly. This was another painful aspect of their romance, his mother didn't approve of Lisa. She didn't come out and say the words of course, but it was there and he wondered if he held back in some way to please her.

Lisa was waiting for him outside her building and when she spotted him, ran up excitedly. "Hey you," she said right before she kissed him. It was a long slow kiss. "So, what do you want to do?" she asked with a smile, as she pulled back and looked up at him.

"I dunno. I got paid yesterday so if you want to go see what's playing at the theater we could do that."

Back in March, he had managed to secure a job: he worked part time for a friend of his dad's in the service management office. This meant he mowed the grass in the summer and did odd jobs whenever they came up.

It wasn't great money or even good hours, but he couldn't bring himself to flip burgers at Burger King, the island's only fast food place. Lisa however did and it was the smell of her clothes when she got off work that kept him from ever taking a job there. She called the smell "Will Repellant" and she refused to let him see her until she had dashed home, showered, and changed.

He usually ended up paying for most of their dates and he didn't mind a bit. He thought of it as his duty as the boyfriend to pay her way and he also knew that despite her working longer hours than he did, she had far less money to spend on fun. Her money went to buy necessities like clothing, school supplies, and sometimes food, for her and her younger brother.

To Lisa's bitter embarrassment, her mother was a boozer. Sometimes her mother would "borrow" money from Lisa's pockets so Will frequently held onto her money for her. The drinking was the primary reason Lisa refused to ever let him near her apartment.

"I think they're still playing, *Kramer versus Kramer* and once was too much for me," Lisa said. Will had to agree—it was dull. "We can go by the Teen Club," Lisa suggested. The Teen Club was the Coast Guard's way to try to reduce vandalism and other mischief done by bored children, by organizing supervised fun.

Supervised fun was not Will's idea of fun. "That place is getting overrun by middle schoolers. Carlos Manalo is throwing a party, how bout we go?" It was worth a shot.

"Carlos? I'd rather not. His parties can get pretty crazy." She wrinkled her nose at the idea. Because of her mother's boozing, Lisa didn't like to be around people when they were drinking and she never touched a drop of alcohol herself. "Are Talitha and Brian going?"

"No, they're going to the library." That had been his only chance at going to the party. If Talitha went then Lisa would go, but unfortunately for him, Talitha was even more against these parties than Lisa. She saw them for what they were: childish and stupid, and really just an excuse to get drunk. He disliked the getting drunk part and tended to leave at the first sign of vomit.

"The library, again? She loves her books way too much!" Lisa took him by the arm and started to lead him away from the building and toward the seawall. "If she had to choose between Brian and all of her books, which would she choose?"

They came up to the seawall and leaned against the chain link fence. The setting sun warmed the evening and quite a few people were taking in the glowing New York skyline.

"That's just it," he said. "She'll never have to choose, since he loves books almost as much as she does." The wind coming off the water blew Lisa's hair back and her eyes shown a brilliant green. Will looked at her and thought she was the prettiest he had ever seen her. His love or liking or whatever it was that he felt for her, filled him suddenly and he took her in his arms and kissed her for a long time.

When they broke apart, Lisa gazed out to the sunset and seemed lost in thought. "They're pretty lucky. I wish..." she paused and sighed.

"You wish what?"

"Nothing. They're just lucky that's all. They're made for each other don't you think?"

3

Talitha and Brian did seem to be two peas in a very nerdy pod. They started going out the previous October after Will had explained to Talitha *The Math* concerning the thought process behind how boys asked girls out. Very soon after that she surprised him when she actually flirted with a boy.

"Hello Brian. That's a nice shirt you're wearing," she had said. The subtlety of this little comment was almost lost on Will. It wasn't until later when he looked at Brian's striped shirt, that he realized it was the same shirt he wore every fourth or fifth day and it wasn't nice at all.

For Talitha, this constituted flirting. However, it was with a boy, Will wouldn't have suggested, but at least it was a start.

If anyone could claim to be bookish, nerdy, and shy, it was Brian Galt. However, he wasn't wholly a lost cause. He played on the high school football team, strictly junior varsity, but it was something. Another not-so-nerdy aspect of Brian's was his confidence; he had an unusual, almost commanding air about himself.

However, being a nerd was almost all about looks. Brian stood a scant two inches taller than Talitha, while his large glasses and the ever-present science fiction book in his hands increased his nerd factor. He was a loner and Will frequently saw him sitting by himself reading.

On the other side of the ledger, Brian was aggressive and tough when called for. Will had seen him fight twice in the short time he knew him and both times, Brian had ended the fights in seconds with blazing fast punches. Talitha had called him a dichotomy and after Will looked it up, he had agreed.

But, dichotomy or not, Brian didn't seem to realize Talitha's sudden interest in his apparel signified flirting. She tried again the next day.

"Brian, you're taking calculus, right? Could you show me how to do this problem?" This was like Beethoven asking somebody what the black keys on a piano were for and Will almost jokingly called her a slut.

Talitha and Brian talked math for a while and the conversation seemed short and to the point, and if there was any flirting going on, Will missed it completely.

When she left, Brian blurted, "I'm going to ask your sister out."

Brian asked Talitha to a Halloween party the next day, and now seven months later, they appeared to be the happiest nerd couple he'd ever seen.

He sometimes even envied them. They were so smooth together and they seemed to fit so right. Will could tell that neither of them doubted for a second the truth of their feelings.

It was his own doubt that he knew was the problem. He was lost in thought as they wandered slowly down the road with the sun easing down, seemingly right into the waters of the harbor.

"Talitha and Brian were made for each other," Lisa said a second time. "Tell me, do you believe in soul mates?"

His first thought was *Inmates* and that made him feel like a complete jerk. "I don't know," Will answered. "Maybe."

"They're so perfect for each other," she said placidly, but he knew her well enough to know that she had been irked at his response.

They strolled inland with no particular destination in mind and didn't speak much, which would've been normal. The two of them were very comfortable with each other and didn't feel the need to talk, just for the sake of being heard. Except that night, Lisa had something to say, which she was finding difficult to spit out.

They walked down Clayton Road and Will decided to cross the Village Green. The Green was a large oak-lined park and he loved to lie in its soft grasses. He grabbed her and pulled her down onto the lawn, beside him, and decided he'd just wait patiently until she was ready to talk.

Colonels Row was visible a short distance away, Lisa asked, "Which one's going to be your house?"

In the daytime all the homes looked pretty much identical. Now they all were lit and seemed lively, except for one that was very dark in comparison.

He pointed to the dark one. "It doesn't look too happy."

Lisa hopped up. "Come on, I want to see it." She dragged him to his feet and they set off toward the house. "Do you know which one is your room? Is it on this side of the house?"

"Mine is in the attic, either those windows on the left or the ones nearer to the center. I haven't decided which room I want." Will pointed up to the top most of the black windows, they seemed very high up. "Talitha wants a room around the other side of the house, on the second floor. It's so small." They were nearing the dark house and Will's voice dropped to slightly above a whisper. "You'd think after being squished in that terrible apartment for so long she'd want one of the bigger ones upstairs."

They stopped on the brick sidewalk that ran all along the Row and stood looking up at the house. It was full dark now and it made the house look brooding and uninviting.

"Look at this place," Lisa remarked quietly. "It's like you're rich or something." She climbed the stairs to the porch and turned back, looking out at the Village Green.

He joined her and the view was beautiful. The lights from the building across the Green twinkled warmly through the trees and they heard kids laughing and yelling down the long row of houses to the left. To the right soft music came from the house next door. Will looked in that direction, but could see no one in any of the windows; the closed drapes barely allowed any light to seep through.

Behind them, Will's new house stood looming, completely silent.

Lisa went to the front door and tried the knob, it opened and she turned back, giving Will her patented wide-eyed 'I'm about to make mischief' smile. She glanced up and down the Row, and then slipped into the house. He quickly followed after and nearly knocked her down when he stepped into the foyer.

The foyer, a partially enclosed room was almost pitch black. "Sorry about that," he whispered. Lisa shushed him as if he were being loud in some way.

He found her hand in the dark and pulled her into the living room, which was better lit from its three windows. Even so, it took a few seconds for their eyes to get used to the dark and then Lisa went to the grand staircase, and ran her hands over the wood banister.

"Wow, this is so nice," she whispered. She then went into the main living room area, not bothering to wait for him and walked to the large fireplace, caressing the wood. "I sure would like to see this in the daytime. Do you think your Mom is going to invite me for dinner anytime soon? Now that she's losing her big excuse, that is."

His mom refused to have anyone visit them in their tiny apartment and their move in date to the big house was a week away. However, Will didn't think she would be sending Lisa an invite in the near future. He could already hear the excuses: "We just moved in, let's give it a few weeks; It's almost your Dad's birthday, maybe next month."

He could think of nothing to say that was believable. "Possibly," he managed finally, with a shrug.

"Sure, maybe I'll just hold my breath." Lisa turned away from him and went into the dining room. Over her shoulder, she murmured, "It's your house too, Will."

He was perplexed at her behavior. She was normally the sweetest person he knew. Will caught up to her as she was heading into the kitchen. "Hey, are you ok?"

She stared at the huge kitchen. "I'm fine, don't worry about me. This room alone could hold half my apartment." She exaggerated, but only by a little. Lisa walked around the room, her green eyes running over the appliances, the windows, and even the wallpaper. "I don't like it," she declared. "It's neither as old and classy as the rest of the place nor is it modern enough. It's got to be one or the other."

Will looked around; he'd been in the house only once before and had never given the room much thought. "As long as there is food in here, I'll be happy," he said. Lisa was quiet for a time as if thinking, and he found it hard to judge her feelings in the darkness.

"Basement?" she asked suddenly, pointing to the basement door. She didn't wait for an answer, but walked past it to the back staircase. These were narrow

and as she began walking up them, surprisingly loud. She stopped quickly and paused listening, but after a few seconds she started up again, this time more quietly. Will followed after.

Lisa acted as her own tour guide. She went to the second floor, took the right into the hallway and stopped briefly looking into Talitha's room.

"If this is Tal's room, you're right it's dinky," she said quietly, before moving on to the family room. Here she didn't even pause since it was utterly dark. Instead, she looked into the master bedroom and whistled at the size of it and at the fireplace. "Fancy, fancy, their own fireplace," she muttered almost to herself. "Must be nice." And with that, she marched past a confused Will and into Katie's room.

She paused in the doorway of the little room and slowly bent down and felt the long fibers of the carpet. She then went over to the windows and Will came up behind her, putting his arms around her waist and holding her. There was something wrong with Lisa, but for the life of him, he didn't know what it was.

The view was the exact same as from the porch, just at a slightly higher angle. The lights of Ligget Hall, across the Green from them were golden and pretty through the trees.

Lisa turned around and kissed him aggressively, almost fiercely. She pulled him down onto the carpet, continuing to kiss him. He was pleasantly surprised at this and kissed her back with passion. She took his hand and laid it on her breast, he massaged it as they kissed and she moaned softly. It became obvious that he was getting aroused and that's when Lisa said, "I love you Will. I truly do."

He paused slightly. "I love you, too." He was a little puzzled again, at her behavior and how she'd said, "I truly do," because it sounded like she was talking to herself.

"Ok, we're done. Get off me please," she demanded without explanation. He pulled back and knelt on the long light yellow shag carpet, confusion marring his handsome features. She saw his look and gave a shrug. "I'm... I'm sorry about that. I'm going to check out the rest of the house. Are you coming or what?"

"What the hell is going on?" Will hissed. "This whole night you're acting like I did something wrong. Why don't you tell me what game you're playing here?"

"I'm not playing anymore, so you don't have to worry," she spoke quietly and walked off down the hall toward the back stairs.

Dumbfounded, he knelt in Katie's room and just shook his head trying to make sense of what had happened. When he heard her on the stairs going up, he got to his feet and followed after.

He found her at the end of the hall in the bedroom to the right; she was just looking at the floor and holding herself with both arms.

"Don't choose this room, it's pretty cold," she advised.

"I don't think you have the right to treat me this way," he said quietly.

She turned toward him and there were tears in her eyes. "You're right. I screwed up somewhere. Probably a year ago. Either way," she paused and looked away blinking rapidly as more tears formed, threatening to spill over. "I should have... man it's cold in here. I think the air conditioner is on."

Will felt it then as well.

It was very cold in the room all of a sudden and he began rubbing his arms. He was just about to ask her why she felt that she screwed up when he heard

someone moving about in the kitchen. After the briefest hesitation, he leapt quietly to Lisa and placed his hand over her mouth, just as she was about to speak.

"There's someone down stairs," he whispered this so softly that he was afraid that she didn't hear it, but a moment later she nodded her head.

Will realized with the rooms empty there was absolutely no place to hide and a thread of disquiet started to unravel somewhere deep within him. Their best course of action was to get out before whoever it was came up stairs. He figured it to be the Security Patrol and that someone must have seen them come in.

"Let's go downstairs," he said as low as before. "If they stay in the kitchen, we'll go out the way we came in. You head straight home; I'll get them to chase me. I can out run all of the SPs, so don't worry, just go home. I'll call you."

She nodded a second time in agreement.

He reached down and slid his tennis shoes off and when Lisa did the same, he started to silently slide over the hardwood floors. When he reached the stairs, he paused listening. Barely twenty seconds had passed since Will had first heard the person and whoever it was sounded like he was still in the kitchen.

Will put his shoelaces in his mouth and half-slid down the walls, keeping the weight of his feet off the center of the stairs, trying only to touch the edges. Lisa imitated him and though they were nearly noiseless, they still made enough sound that Will thought the person in the kitchen should have heard something.

When he reached the landing he heard a murmuring from the kitchen. It was odd sounding, like a foreign language, but despite straining, he couldn't make it out. It gave him the creeps and his back muscles danced and twitched. Sweat trickled down his skin, despite the air conditioning.

Lisa came up behind him and he pointed for her to go on toward the main stairs.

Her face looked deathly pale in the dim light and he saw the fear in her eyes as she turned and started slowly... too slowly, moving down the hall. She seemed to be taking forever. He stood by Talitha's bedroom door just in case he had to make a distraction and Lisa was only halfway down the hall, when Will heard the first heavy footfall on the backstairs.

With a start, he turned to go down the hall and was surprised to see Lisa frozen in place midway down it, her face looked stiff with fear. As fast and quietly as he could, he slid down the hall and as he got to Lisa, he gave her a nudge to get her moving.

"Go," he whispered

However, she stood immobilized with fright, staring back behind him at the stairs and wouldn't budge, except to tremble, fawnlike. There was no way they would make it to the stairs in time, so in silence he picked her up and stepped into the pitch black family room.

A second later, he heard the patrolman pause at the landing and Will felt oddly apprehensive. Not just nervous but afraid. He shouldn't have been. If they were caught all that would happen is his Dad would ground him or make him do some extra chores, but for some reason he felt far more afraid than the situation called for.

He stood there in the dark room with Lisa in his arms. She breathed very shallowly into his neck, and he could feel her body trembling against his. Slowly the tempo of her breathing began to pick up.

For what felt like an eternity, the security patrolman stood on the landing, listening for them. Why wouldn't he leave? Fearing that the sound of her breathing would give them away, Will pressed Lisa's face firmer into his neck.

Finally the patrolmen began climbing the back stairs and Will felt the stress drain from him.

"Go on," he whispered a few seconds later. Above them the patrolman creaked about whispering in that strange language, making the hair on his arms raise. Will didn't want to hear another word of it and hurried Lisa onto the banister of the great stairs.

They slid down it and escaped out into the night moments later.

The night air felt suddenly very hot and muggy after the coldness of the dark house, but he was glad for it. The warmth helped to drive away the last of the chill that had settled in his bones. Leading the way, Will slipped through the gloom of the looming shadows of the tall oaks and periodically turned and walked backwards to stare up at the house.

It was creepy. The house was so dark that it was almost a hole in the surrounding shadows and his body gave a shudder at the sight. It was soon lost from view by the trees and he was glad for that. They reached the end of the Row and cut across the narrow portion of the Green heading home and only then did Will breathe out a huge sigh of relief.

"I bet that was Skipper. None of the SPs are as slow as him, thank God." He laughed feeling the tension drain away and smiled at Lisa. Skipper was the Island's ancient bow-legged security guard; he had very bad knees and waddled everywhere.

She smiled a crooked smile back. "That was...you were great, Will. I completely froze. I would've been caught for certain and I was so afraid. I mean, I was petrified. It was weird. I guess in a spooky house at night, even Skipper can be frightening."

She shook her head and ran her hand across her face. Will reached out to her, their argument of a few minutes earlier completely forgotten by him.

But not by her.

"Will, I need to break up with you." He pulled his hand back as if she had tried to bite it. "I'm sorry," she continued. "But I need someone to really and truly love me and you don't. I've been fooling myself now for so long, but I can't do it anymore."

"What? I do love you. What have you heard? Is there some rumor going around that I don't? Lisa, look at me, I do love you." He felt it then, the love, but he also felt something else he had trouble putting his finger on. Relief? Anger certainly. Frustration? Bewilderment? Maybe all of those at once, but also indignation that she would presume to tell him how he felt.

"Will, stop it! I don't think you know what love is. Maybe I don't either. But I do know that it isn't temporary—it's supposed to last. And I can tell you don't feel the same way I do." He started to protest, but she cut him off. "Will, do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?"

He paused looking astonished. "I'm seventeen, damn it! How do I know who I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life with! You're asking for the impossible. I do love you, but I'm still a kid."

Lisa had been walking this whole time but stopped. "I sometimes think you love me as much as I love you and that's what has kept me going. But if you really do love me...then you're holding something back." She started to cry, the tears making the green of her eyes stand out, even in the dark. "When you're truly in love, Will, you never ever think about it ending. You want it to last for always."

"Wait! Lisa, you're making a mistake, I love you. But I don't know. I... I... you're asking too much." Will's mind swirled with everything she had said, and he was having trouble thinking clearly. He had never asked himself whether he wanted to spend his life with Lisa; he was still trying to figure out if he truly loved her. He didn't know even then for sure, but he knew he didn't want to lose her, he never wanted that.

She shook her head at him. "You're the one who's asking too much! I have given you all of my love, *I've* not held anything back. I only have one thing left to give, but it's not going to go to some scared momma's boy. You want to have sex with me, but when you're done, I'll be thrown out like yesterday's trash!"

"That's not true at all; I actually think it'll bring us closer together. Lisa, I don't want to lose you." Her tears were starting to affect him—he was hurting her, and it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Lisa sniffed hugely and said, "I'm as close to you as I'll ever get. But you never tell me you love me, unless I say it first. You don't love me. You really like me and that's great, I guess, but..." she stopped and looked up at him and he saw the misery in her eyes. He was doing this to her—hurting her and he felt a desperate need to make it right.

"What can I do to fix this?" he asked.

"Be honest with yourself," she said quietly. "We've been together for nearly a year and you don't even like to talk about love. You seem freaked out about it. Look, if you haven't figured out if you love me by now, it means there's nothing to figure out." She stopped for a moment, wiped her eyes, and then looked at him with determination. "Will, I can take it. I've known for a while that you don't love me. Here's your chance to walk away without being the bad guy. I know you see my tears and want to fix this, but you can't, not without giving everything you have to me. The feeling you have right now, right this second, is... is pity, not love. It's time to be honest with yourself and with me."

Was she right? She was certainly right about the pity; he felt her pain keenly and was willing to say or do anything to end it. But was she right about the rest? Will needed time to sort this out.

"I don't know what to say or do. I need some time," he started to say, but Lisa interrupted.

"No, it's time you started being a man. You were a man up in that house. I need you to be a man now and come clean. Just tell me the truth, not what you think will stop my tears, but the truth, deep down."

Right then she seemed so mature and Will felt like a stupid kid who didn't know what he wanted; his greatest feeling at the moment was confusion.

Lisa seemed to sense this and said, "I know this came out of the blue for you, but tell me, what you were feeling earlier tonight when I mentioned Soul Mates? You seemed to cringe."

Will cringed again. He remembered exactly what he had thought, *Inmates*, and he certainly wouldn't tell her that, it would just hurt her more. Maybe she was right, maybe he should tell her how confused he was.

"I don't know what to say," he whispered. "I think I love you, but I feel like a kid still and it just seems so big. I've never been in love before and I don't know. I don't know what I'm feeling or what I'm supposed to feel."

Her tears became huge and raced down her face.

"Ok, ok you're being honest... good. But...you don't know after a year, you don't know. Goodbye Will. I love you, but I... I... can't be in a relationship where I'm the only one in love." She tried to smile through her tears. "Good bye."

She walked away.

Chapter 5

M-Day.

June 2, 1980

1

Gayle was finally lying in *her* bed. She turned her head and saw that William had a lot of room on his side. "What a bed hog," she thought and then smiled, she had plenty of room also. For the first time in fourteen months, she was back in *her* bed.

She snuggled deeper into the freshly washed sheets, her long brown hair standing out against the stark white of the pillowcase. The sheets had just come out of the drier a few minutes ago and they were still warm. Which was a good thing too, since their new house was always so chilly. It was one of the few things about the place that bothered her.

On the bright side, it was just another reason to cuddle with her husband. William was a big strapping man at his peak, physically. She loved to lie in his strong arms and never felt safer than at those moments. Restless, she scooted over to him, to steal his heat and thought to herself, "What a day it's been."

Gayle looked up at the high ceiling and couldn't believe she was so wide-awake; she should be dead to the world.

Only that day, at long last, had they finally moved out of the Cave, as she thought of their apartment and into the big spacious home on the Row. It had been quite a day and she figured that it was all the excitement and stress of moving that kept her up.

However, it was a good stress, the first good stress in her life since Alabama.

Whenever she thought of stress, she reminded herself that it could always be worse; William could be assigned to one of the boats again after all. He loved the

boats or cutters as he called them and was never happier than when his boat would head out into a hurricane going to help some idiot with more money than brains.

She couldn't blame him however, she had known what she was signing on for when she married him. He was a man through and through and had chosen his profession strictly for the adventure. William hated his current position as much as Gayle had hated him on the boats. He worked in logistics for the first district now and the way he put it, he was the: "Officer in Charge of Toilet Paper."

There was certainly going to be no complaining from her. He was always home in time for dinner and the only night operations were at the Officer's club. Moreover, with the move, he was at least going to be treated like an officer for a change. They were now living in what people referred to as "Officer Country." Their front door opened onto the spacious, park-like setting of the Village Green while their back door went straight to the golf course.

William snored next to her. He could fall asleep practically in an instant—she envied that trait. Gayle rolled over, again. Maybe she was having trouble sleeping because her children were now so far away from her. Although Katie was close, only in the next room, Talitha was down at the other end of the hall and Willy J was even further. He had chosen the larger room in the attic, the one on the far left.

Gayle would have chosen the one on the right, since it was brighter and closer to the bathroom. She thought he would likely change his mind in a few weeks, when he finally got over that Lisa and started thinking straight.

Willy J had been moping around for a week, since his breakup with her and Gayle thought it was about time he found a new girlfriend. Their neighbors, just to the north had a gorgeous raven-haired daughter, who had been practically throwing herself on Willy J. Not that Gayle really approved of a girl acting in such a forward manner, but he should've at least noticed her.

The girl, Amy Harris, was also pretty. Lisa could only be considered plain looking and Gayle, who had seen her just a couple of times, noted that she never wore makeup even though she really needed to.

Lying there, she wondered what Willy J saw in her and shuddered at the notion of how easy she must've been. However, the weird part was that she had broken up with him. Did Lisa possibly think she could do better? And the rumors about her mother! Gayle hoped Willy J had never gone into their apartment. According to laundromat gossip, which was usually pretty accurate, the woman was a complete drunk.

To Gayle the breakup was all for the best and the fact that it happened so close to M-Day she took as a sign that there would be a new beginning for Will.

2

M-Day was the code word that Gayle used instead of saying, moving day. Since their move in date had been postponed so many times, she felt saying the words, *moving day* had jinxed it. The code word also went with the military theme that

she had adopted. She wanted the move to go as smoothly as possible and decided to run it like a military operation.

During the week just prior to M-Day, Gayle put her plans in writing, complete with maps. She assigned duties to each of the family members and her commanding style earned her the nickname, Captain Mom. Everyone would jokingly give her an, "Aye, Aye Captain!" whenever she ordered a new chore for them to do.

When Katie saw that even her dad was saluting Captain Mom she asked him, "Is a captain bigger than you?"

William, who was busy wrapping dishes in paper towels and then stacking them in a cardboard box the neat way his wife had shown him, looked quizzically at his daughter. "Which captain do you mean?"

Katie's main job was to keep out of the way and she wasn't very good at it. She looked puzzled at her father's response and said with her little brow furrowed, "Not a witch-captain, a *normal* one."

This confused William so much that he stopped wrapping the dishes. "Could you rephrase your question please? Rephrase means ask it again, but in a slightly different way, so I might understand it better." He glanced and saw that his wife was looking at them and went back to work with obvious and exaggerated motions.

Katie paused and pursed her lips together, thinking about how to ask such a simple question in a different way.

"Umm, ok. Is a captain bigger?" She stood up on her chair and raised her hand high above her head, to show her daddy what bigger meant. "Or smaller than you?" At this, she placed her tiny hands about two inches apart to show William, that he was apparently mouse-sized.

William stopped working again and looked at his daughter completely nonplussed.

Talitha, who'd just entered the tiny kitchen with a cardboard box of her own, tried her best to make things clear, "Some captains are big and some are smaller, ok? Just like some mommies are big, like Mrs. Landon and some are small, like our mommy."

"I don't mean big and fat," Katie said. Mrs. Landon was the size of a house and had to turn sideways to fit through her apartment door. "I mean *big*." She then put her hands on her hips and puffed up her tiny chest. Talitha immediately became as bewildered as her father.

Because the apartment was so minuscule, Gayle could hear and see practically the entire conversation. She started to feel that Katie had created some sort of mental quicksand and that first her husband and now Talitha were being sucked into it. Gayle smirked; she secretly enjoyed watching the two smartest people she knew become dumbfounded by a six-year-old.

Since the kitchen already held three people and a small box and was thus overflowing, Gayle stood in the doorway.

"Congratulations, Katie!" she said with a big smile for her daughter. "You've stumped these two geniuses with your tricky question. I think that means you're the smartest!" Katie returned her smile with an even bigger one. She liked the idea

of being the smartest. Gayle then added, "You want to know if a captain can boss around a commander, like your Father and make him do things, right?"

Katie gave a look of relief. "Yes! That's it, Mommy."

"A captain *is* bigger than a commander... which is why he has to do what I say, because I'm captain of this here crew. Now, he'll get back to work or else I'm going to start cracking the whip!" Gayle said and then with a sly look at her husband, she continued, "And I do have a whip." William smiled right back knowingly, but Talitha grimaced.

"You two have such polluted minds!" she cried.

"You have a whip, Mommy?" Katie asked and then started to say, "What's a whi..."

Gayle cut her off. "Enough questions, Katie. I have an order for you. I need you to go and empty out your old ratty toy box. All of your toys have to go into the brown box that's sitting in your room." Gayle then stood erect and said, "And that's an order Lieutenant Katie, now move!" The little girl dashed by her mother and headed for the room she shared with her sister. "And you two, Commander Chitty Chat and Lieutenant Lazybones. More work and less talk, or you'll be walking the plank!"

"Are we supposed to be pirates?" Talitha laughed.

"She's right, honey. We don't use the plank in the Coast Guard. It would be a waste of time, since someone would have to dive right in afterwards and save them." William's tone then became serious, "And you're not supposed to use a whip either. Regulations state, a light spanking should be administered to the rear end..."

"AHHHH! My ears!" Talitha interrupted. "Will, save me! Mom and dad are being so gross."

Gayle enjoyed this, but there was a still lot of work to do. "It's seems I'm going to have to separate you two. William, finish with this here box matey and take her down to ye olde storage room. And remember landlubber when you're on my crew, you *always* have to come back!"

William snapped to attention and gave her his most formal salute, what he called his Admiral's salute. "Aye, aye Captain!" he said. Gayle returned the salute and went to check on Willy J, who was supposed to be putting his clothes neatly into one of the boxes.

Behind her, she heard Talitha ask her father, "Why did mom say you *always* have to come back? Were you going somewhere?"

"No, she was just alluding to the old Coast Guard saying and was suggesting that I shouldn't be unnecessarily slow."

"I'm not familiar with any Coast Guard sayings, what does it mean?" Talitha asked. At that, Gayle paused in the short hallway and her body gave a little shudder.

"The full quote is *The Blue Book says we've got to go out; it doesn't say a damn thing about having to come back*, it means..." William hesitated and Gayle knew he was wondering if she could hear him. "It means," he began again, in almost a whisper. "When we're trying to rescue someone and it looks dangerous... we don't have the option to not try. We have to at least make the attempt. The quote comes from a Captain Etheridge and supposedly, what happened was a ship had run

aground on some dangerous shoals and he was sent to the rescue site. He ordered the cutter's lifeboat in and the crew balked, saying, *They would never make it back*, and he said, *The Blue Book says we've got to go out and it doesn't say a damn thing about having to come back*. Basically he told them they had no choice but to go in."

"What happened to the ship? And why are we whispering?" Talitha whispered to her father.

"The ship? Dashed to pieces on the rocks, same with the lifeboat. But our guys had life preservers and were good swimmers so they made it out alive," William said. "We're whispering because your mother hates the saying. She always demanded that I come back no matter what the Coast Guard regulations say."

Gayle's body gave another involuntary shudder and she reminded herself that the only boat he had a shot at now was one of the big cutters and even then, he wasn't likely going to get one.

Two days after that conversation, Operation M-Day was carried out successfully, with very few casualties. The first casualty was a chair that went with their expensive couch set. It had become home to a family of mice, or at least that's what Gayle told herself. If it had been rats, she would've had to burn the chair on the spot. It wasn't a complete loss, but would have to be re-upholstered at some point when they had money to spare.

The next casualty was not a total loss either, a large fruit bowl given to her by her mom, was dropped and exploded like an artillery shell into a thousand pieces. The bowl was terribly garish and ugly, but she could neither break it purposely herself, nor hide it away due to her mom's frequent visits. Now she could be rid of the ghastly thing and not have to lie about what happened.

Due to Gayle's pre-planning, all aspects of the operation went smoothly. Each box and piece of furniture had been labeled, with a one, two, three, or B, to denote the floor of the house, followed by a letter to denote the room. For example, Talitha's room was labeled 2-T and so were all of her boxes. Gayle had been through enough moves in her time that she never again wanted to hear: "Where does this go?"

During the actual move, Gayle's biggest issue was trying to stop Katie from being Katie.

Every time she turned around, she saw the little blonde girl almost being stepped on, opening boxes, sliding down the banister, and turning cartwheels in front of the movers as they lugged heavy loads. Katie felt the absolutely unquenchable desire, to tell the movers exactly what was in each of the boxes.

Gayle discovered that the only way to stop Katie was to sit on her and she did just that. That was late in the afternoon and it turned into a mistake, as Gayle was almost too tired to get back up.

3

At that time, she could've fallen asleep on the couch with the squirming Katie giggling underneath her, but now six hours later she felt wide-awake.

Apart from William's light snoring the house was completely still. It was getting chillier however and she reminded herself to ask William where the thermostat for the air conditioner was. She thought they were lucky since theirs was the only home on the Row with central air conditioning. Every other house had the stubby little grey boxes hanging out of various windows. Gayle considered them ugly and thought her house looked the nicest without them.

Just then there was a sound on the stairs, a footstep.

Gayle realized that she had fallen asleep and was a little cross at... Willy J, by the sound of it. He normally had a huge appetite and was likely getting something to eat. Because of the tight budget they were on she would've been upset with him for sneaking food, were it not for the fact that he had been eating like a mouse since his breakup with Lisa, and so Gayle let it slide for now.

He sure was mopey sounding. It seemed to her like he was sleepwalking going up those stairs.

When it was quiet again, Gayle, who had begun shivering, snuggled up closer to her husband. Thirty minutes later, she rolled over for what felt like the hundredth time.

The fans!

That's what Gayle needed. While they had been stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, their little condominium had no air conditioning at all and it would become positively sweltering in the summer. The only way any of them could sleep was if a fan were blowing right down on them. She had become addicted to the thrum of the fans at night and ever since, she fell asleep easier when they were on.

Other than the tremendous heat, she had enjoyed Charleston. She loved the beaches of South Carolina, the white sand that was always so hot...

Seven hours later, Gayle woke up feeling like a cat: she was warm, curled up in her sheets, and decided that sleeping was the only thing of any importance. It was light out however and that meant Katie would soon be demanding breakfast. She glanced to the right to check the time, but habit had tricked her. All she saw in that direction were boxes and the fireplace.

A gravelly groan escaped from her as she started looking to the left, it was so much work to roll over, but she finally made it all the way to her left, 7:46 am.

"Wow! How'd I sleep that late?" she asked aloud. She really had to get moving, but her body creaked and popped and generally fought getting out of bed. She was now feeling her forty years like never before.

William, of course wasn't in bed. Gayle knew that he'd been up at five, regardless that yesterday had been M-Day and knowing him, had likely run his five miles already as well. Governors Island was small, only about two miles all the way around it and William would simply lap it two and a half times and use the remainder as a cool down. He was like clockwork, out the door by 6:00 am, back sweating like a pig at 6:52 am.

If he varied this and went at all slower, Gayle would hear him berating himself for being soft and wimpy. This she didn't understand. Eight-minute miles at the age of forty-one was very good.

The most she ever exercised was chasing around after Katie, and now the clock told her it was time for her daily constitutional. The morning felt as chilly as the night had been and her first order of business was to find her robe. She looked all

around her at the stacks of cardboard boxes sitting mutely. One of them held her robe but she couldn't remember which and she was too tired to start digging through them all. Two of William's were open and peeking in, she saw that one held his workout clothes.

Good enough she decided, and slipped on a pair of his sweatpants over her pajamas and cinched them up, just under her breasts. She then put the matching sweatshirt on as well and looked at herself in the full-length mirror.

"Hello sexy," she purred to the pathetic looking girl in the mirror.

Girl? Now that was funny. It felt like years since she'd been a "Girl." Though when she flapped her arms she looked a little like Katie pretending to be a penguin and that was girlish. She went to reach for her hairbrush, but this too was in the belly of one the stout little boxes and she aged a few years at the thought of unpacking all of them.

The sound of Katie digging through her toy box reached her. It grew louder and then Gayle heard her say "MMMHHH!" It was the Katie sound for frustration. She went to her daughter's room and standing in the doorway, peeked in. Most of her little room was jumbled with half-open boxes, while mounds of toys were strewn about here and there. By all appearances, some sort of great toy battle had been waged in the room recently.

Katie was currently half-in and half-out of a box. Her tiny bottom was sticking out of the top, while the whole of her upper body was down inside it. With the flaps partially closed, Gayle had the disquieting notion that Katie was being eaten by the box. She shook off the weird thought, reached over and gave her youngest daughter a playful spank.

The little bottom jumped as if stung by a bee.

"Hey! Cut it out," Katie's cry sounded muffled and her legs gave a little irritated kick. She pulled herself out of the box and it was obvious that like her mother, Katie hadn't found a hairbrush either. Her hair went in every direction at once and there was an old Tinkerbelle sticker stuck in it, as well as some dust bunnies.

"Oh hi, Mommy. I thought you were Tal."

"Do we look that much alike to you?" Gayle asked as she started to pull the sticker and dust bunnies out of her daughter's hair.

"Lots of times you do, yeah," Katie responded, however she then leaned back away from her mom and gave her an appraising eye. "But not today. You look kinda fat." Gayle looked down at herself in her two layers of clothing and had to agree. But at least she was warm. Katie continued on, "You know? You should only wear dresses, on-a-cuz that you're a girl. I like the pretty blue one you wore the time that daddy got all dressed up and had his sword on. Did you get to have a sword too?"

Gayle knew the dress Katie meant and she loved it as well. "No I didn't get to wear a sword that night and I'm glad too. It wouldn't have looked good with my fancy dress and they're really just for boys anyway."

"Did the boys have sword fights, like in the movies?" Katie's blue eyes widened at the thought.

"Sorry, nope," Gayle smiled at her pretty daughter. "They're just for show and they aren't even that sharp."

Gayle knew a secret about William and his sword that he didn't know, she knew: he sometimes *played* with his sword, swinging it about and stabbing at the air. She knew also that he wished it were sharp like a real sword. Once she'd seen him fingering the edge of his blade and muttering, "Pathetic." It was a ceremonial sword used by officers for parades and formal dinners, but it was still a sword however, and not only could you put an eye out easily, a man as strong as William could very well kill someone with it.

Katie wore a hopeful look now. "They're not only supposed to be for boys, you know. Some girls in my class have swords like daddy's, so can I get one too?" Katie lied unconvincingly.

"No, but you can have breakfast if you can tell me who these girls are, so I can call their mothers." Gayle gave her daughter a steely, 'I mean business' look.

"I... I... there are no girls with swords, Mommy," Katie admitted in a little voice. "I didn't meant it, on-a-cuz it just came out."

"It didn't just come out, Katie. We don't lie in this family, do you hear me?" Gayle's kids were good kids, but they weren't perfect and she had dealt with this before. Talitha had always tried to back up her lies with fanciful statistics. Katie looked properly miserable, which was good. "Ok, but you're going to have to do some chores around here to work it off. But first, breakfast!"

"Can you help look for something first?" Katie asked. "I can't find my Halloween costume anywhere." She grabbed a chair from her hard plastic kitchen set and brought it over to the box she'd been in. Soon, Katie's bottom was back up in the air as she dove head first into the box.

At that moment, Gayle was stuck by an intense feeling of *déjà vu*. It was something about the room. Not the boxes... it was that chair... and the costume. She had dreamed of Katie in a red coat, but now Gayle realized it was a costume.

The dream started to come back to her in pieces. She had been walking around the house looking in all the rooms for something. Gayle remembered feeling anxious, but about what she didn't know. All the rooms and hallways had been dark...she had started in the kitchen and then gone up the back stairs to Talitha's room. Her room had been empty and so was Willy J's, but Katie had been in her room, playing.

Gayle remembered sitting at the tiny table with her knees up to her chin having tea. The room wasn't as dark as the hallways had been, but it was still dim. There was a vague blue light coming in from the windows that made the light yellow carpet look like it was light green instead. Katie served real tea, but in the little plastic tea cups and Gayle remembered looking at the tea, fearing it would be cold. For some reason she was afraid of the cold. However, it was the costume that Gayle recalled most vividly, it was very red, and Katie's eyes were bright blue in her face. Sometime during their playing Gayle noticed that she too had on a red cape which brought with it a sense of alarm.

That was the whole dream, or all of it that Gayle could remember, and for her that was a lot, since she never remembered her dreams like other people could. Thinking about the dream and the *déjà vu* made her feel slightly uneasy and Gayle stood looking at Katie's bottom for a moment longer, wondering why and then said, "All the costumes are in the basement boxes."

Gayle heard a disappointed, "Oh," from the box and then Katie struggled out. "Can you get it for me, please?"

Gayle sighed, that seemed like a lot of work and she was already tired at 8:00 am. "Maybe, we'll see how the day goes. We have a lot of unpacking still to do. But now, breakfast. Watcha want?"

"French toast please," Katie responded in her sweet, I'm-just-too-cute-to-say-no-to, manner. Gayle sighed again, that seemed like a lot of work as well, and suddenly she felt even more tired at 8:01 am.

Chapter 6

Commander William Jern and the Ghost. June 3rd 1980

1

William's pace was way off. "Come on!" he grouched to himself, but it didn't have the desired effect, he only felt slightly more winded. A glance at his watch, at the four-mile mark showed him he was at thirty-four minutes. This was bad news and he pressed forward harder.

Suddenly he developed a stitch in his side and grimaced. He couldn't remember the last time he had a stitch; it might've been in the eighth grade. However, he did remember the simple key to fighting a stitch, which was to not think about it.

To take his mind off it he watched the passing scenery: the ferryboats, the sea gulls, the sky-scrappers in the distance, and he listened to the rhythmic pounding of the waves just below the sea wall.

It didn't work.

The stitch was still there and William castigated himself for being a slug. Up ahead he spied another jogger. It was a man in a grey sweat suit and he had about a three hundred yard lead on William. This is what he needed: a challenge. He stared at the man's distant back and started sucking wind. It was far too early for his final push, but this was his only chance and William forgot his stitch and found a good rhythm.

With a half mile to go his body felt good for the first time that morning, but then the other jogger suddenly stopped. The man in the grey sweat suit doubled over with what looked like a cramp in his side.

"Damn! Silly little wimp," William thought uncharitably.

In less than a minute, he breezed by the jogger and pretended not to notice that it was Captain Hadley of the DALLAS. Being on patrol sure did limit one's ability to exercise, he reflected.

William finished the turn at the top of the pear-shaped island, looked down the long east side of it, and could see the DALLAS at its moorings. The sweep of her lines were long and clean and William wanted her badly. He loved these runs in

the morning and always tried to end them just in front of where the big Coast Guard Cutters sat moored.

At that moment, he realized his breathing had become easier and that meant he was slacking again. He kicked it in, for his final sprint but there was just not that much left in the tank, and he came puffing up to where the DALLAS lay in the water, at a time of forty-one minutes and thirty-six seconds.

"Damn, I'm getting old."

His breath came up in huge gusts and the sweat drained down his body as if he had just stepped from a shower. He wandered halfway up the pier, wanting to get a better look at the DALLAS, but then remembered that Captain Hadley would be along in moments and so turned for home, not wanting to embarrass the man.

He could now start thinking about his day and figured it was going to be another long one. If Gayle really knew anything about the military, the day would have been referred to, as M-Day+ 1, and she would've had objectives and plans for this day as well. Part of him rejoiced that she didn't.

Primarily, there would be unpacking, but at some point, he was definitely going to give Lieutenant James Andre another call.

James ran the service management office for the island and he had insisted that the boiler in the house was new and in perfect condition; it was most certainly not.

2

When William woke up that morning, the thermostat read forty-eight degrees; it was actually warmer outside the house than in. He checked to see if the settings on the thermostat were properly set and they were. After waiting for a few moments for the sound of the boiler to kick in, he grew impatient and went to the nearest radiator, he found it almost ice cold.

"What the hell?"

He had gone straight down to the basement at that point and it was then that his day became... weird. Entering the room, he reached out to give the light switch a casual flick and the room blazed, brightly lit for a millisecond, like the flash from a camera and then went dark.

Standing in the doorway with one hand on the switch and the other balled into a fist, he froze in place. He didn't believe in ghosts, he was far too rational, but in the hundredth of a second that the light was on, he thought he saw something. It had seemed to be a great black figure outlined against the boiler. William's breath caught in his throat; he waited one second, then another, his jaw clenched and set firm; he stood unmoving.

He knew his mind was just playing tricks on him, but the strange, fearful image carved into his mind held him in place for a moment nonetheless. Then he stepped back, reached out with his left hand and found the light switch to the laundry room, and snapped it upright.

Light blazed from behind him, showing... nothing... there was nothing in the boiler room. William stood there, not at all afraid or freaked out; instead he was angry. He was mostly angry with himself for being every kind of fool to think, even for those two seconds that there was something haunting his boiler room. Yet

there was also a reserve of anger for the Greek painter, who had instilled this nonsense to begin with.

Turning on the spot, he headed back to the stairs, needing another light bulb. He started to go up but stopped with his foot on the first step. The door to the basement stood closed. It had been half-open a moment before when he went down, he was sure of it, yet now it was closed.

The house was one of the draftiest places William had ever been in and the wind must have blown the door shut, he assured himself.

The stairs creaked loudly as he started back up.

You didn't feel any draft, did you?

The question popped into his head and William ignored it.

You didn't hear it shut, either.

He ignored this statement as well, but his jaw clenched all the same.

At the top of the stairs a new thought, actually more of a vision came into his mind: he was just reaching for the doorknob when he pictured the shiny new hasp that been put on the other side of the door, and through the catch of the hasp was a shiny new lock. William's hand seemed to stop on its own,

"Don't be a fool. There's no lock in the hasp," he berated himself. He knew the painter took the lock, he remembered seeing Katie hand it to him. However, in his mind he pictured the hasp and its shiny new lock—in this vision it wasn't a combination lock, but one that needed a key.

William stood poised at the door with his hand out and he recalled thinking how much he loved the craftsmanship of the house. How everything seemed so well made, sturdy, built to last. Even the doors had come under his scrutiny and he'd found these were not veneer over plywood. No, these were thick and heavy. You wouldn't want to be trapped behind one of these doors, because there'd be no getting through it. He felt a slight tingle of fear.

The figure in the boiler room was a brief shock, but this was a creeping fear that William felt growing in him. *Where's the key, William?* The question, as the others before, came to him as if from someone else, and the tone was insidious and sly and the feeling of being trapped in the basement grew in him rapidly.

"There's no damn lock," William said and turned the knob. The door opened. Walking into the kitchen, he leaned over the sink with both hands on the counter. He shook his head again, and couldn't believe how he was acting. The strobe light image of the figure flashed into his mind once more.

"Jesus!" He came to a quick decision, and turning away from the sink he went back to the basement door. Passing through it, he purposefully shut it behind him so that he heard the door catch. There'd be no breeze moving the door about now. He then went down the stairs and turned off the light at the bottom and then he moved to the laundry to do the same.

His world was pitch black now and he confidently walked into the boiler room, sat down on the dusty floor and waited. He knew what he was so calmly waiting for...absolutely nothing. There was no boiler monster, or black ghost, these were only silly childish fears. William's mindset was one of determination and if there was any fear in him, it was so deeply suppressed that it didn't register.

Purposefully, he tried to bring back the feelings of fear, so that he could confront them.

William imagined the dark figure he thought he'd seen and the strobe light effect flashed in his mind. However, it was weaker and when he tried to analyze it, he found he wasn't afraid at all and chalked it up to a trick of the light.

After a while he became bored. His mind drifted to the day Katie and he visited the house and scared the painter. When Katie had left them, the painter had blurted out some foolishness about the house being haunted. At that point, William had been very happy that he'd sent his daughter away, since all it would have caused were nightmares and a phobia of the basement.

"What did the painter say?" he asked the empty room. William could only vaguely remember: scary sounds and peeling paint. He couldn't recall much more since he had barely listened. "Whatever. It was all crap."

After yawning a couple times, he decided the experiment with the "ghost" was over. He left the basement and a few minutes later began his morning run.

Now, as he walked confidently along, finishing his cool-down from his run he tried to forget how foolish he'd felt. But he wasn't forgetting his anger over the boiler and Lieutenant Andre would be getting an earful from him.

William came up to far end of Clayton road and with a last look at the East River, he turned inland. He saw the small Catholic Church to his left and decided this was probably the best way to go to get home. Colonels Row started about a hundred yards from it.

"Who would want to go to this church?" he wondered.

It was dinky and not very attractive, especially compared to the Protestant one down the street. William and Gayle had been to the other church on the island, St Cornelius for two different weddings. To him that one seemed more like a proper church, with its great high ceilings and polished hardwood floors it was almost a cathedral. Even its heavy wrought iron bound doors were beautiful.

The plainer glass ones of the tiny Catholic Church simply couldn't match up. None of it could. The church was a dull white rectangle with a small steeple in front. Just outside its double glass doors was a bulletin board, which read, "Our Lady Star of The Sea Chapel, Father Alba." To William, that seemed quite a mouthful for such a little affair.

"Star of The Sea," he murmured quietly to himself. He liked the sound of that; it went well with his calling and the theme of the island in general. On impulse, he turned up the walk and peered through the glass of the double doors wondering if the church would have a naval motif.

It seemed dark and empty and he was about to turn away when a shadow blacker than the surrounding darkness moved toward the doors. For the second time that morning, he jumped back startled. One of the glass doors opened silently and a short, chubby priest walked out. The priest had very thin brown hair, so much so, that William who towered over him, could make out the beginnings of a bald spot. He was also extremely jovial and seemed almost delighted to have startled William.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm sorry!" the priest apologized, although his huge grin seemed to indicate that he was far from being actually sorry. He reached out both hands and for a second William thought the priest was going to hug him about his waist. Instead, he took William's right hand in both of his, and shook it. William

was extremely embarrassed that he hadn't proffered his hand to the man in the first place.

"Commander Jern!" the priest announced. "I'm so glad to meet you, finally. I'm afraid you're late for the sunrise Mass. Tsk, tsk."

William was almost speechless. Neither Gayle nor he were religious in any way, he was an atheist while Gayle was a non-practicing Baptist. He wondered how the man even knew his name and why he would think that he'd be going to church dressed as he was in sweaty running clothes.

"Uh," was all that he could manage to say, before the priest burst into laughter over some unknown joke.

"I'm joking! Joking, Commander Jern," he enjoyed his laughter and his cheeks turned a quick pink. He wiped his eyes, chortled once more and smiled expectantly at William.

"I'm sorry, but... you must be Father Alba?" William didn't know a priest from a monk, and could only hope he wasn't being offensive.

"Yes, that's me, Father Father." At this the priest chuckled some more. Upon seeing William's blank look he added, "Alba means Father, in an African tribal language. So you see, to them I'm Father Father." There was an embarrassed pause, and then Father Alba continued, "Why do I always do that? I make jokes that no one possibly could understand. Ah well, come in, come in please. I want to show you my church."

"I'm not Catholic... Father White," William said.

"Ha ha! A scholar. Yes, the name means white as well and in more languages too. But I know you're not a Catholic, I know. That's why I said *my* church and not *our* church."

Father Alba was unstoppable. With the greatest familiarity, he hooked his arm through William's arm and led him up to the church. William felt like one of the little old men he'd seen while in Italy who went about holding each other this way. It felt distinctly un-American to him, but he couldn't be rude to such a jolly person who was so obviously well-meaning.

"You just moved in, up the Row? Isn't that correct?" the priest asked. The church seemed dim compared to the brightness of the morning and William's eyes took a moment to adjust. He was about to answer the priest, but Father Alba beat him to it. "I saw the trucks yesterday. I was walking back home. I live at the far end of the Row, in the B.O.Q you know."

William didn't know.

The Bachelor's Officers Quarters or B.O.Q in military jargon was an interesting building with wrap around porches on two floors. William had a few friends and subordinates who lived there, but he didn't remember seeing Father Alba when he had visited. The priest began jabbering on about the B.O.Q and William decided that he would remain silent and just let Father Alba talk. The man seemed so chatty he wondered what it would be like to put him and Katie in a small room together.

A minute later, after the briefest of pauses from his last statement, Father Alba said, "So I was thinking it would be a good idea," he paused for a quick breath. "A good idea to schedule a time to bless your new home." Father Alba anticipated William's objection, and simply spoke right over it, "I have you down for the day

after tomorrow at six. Now you know... you know I'll be hungry at that time, so if Gayle wants to cook something I'm partial to Italian, but I won't say no to Mexican."

Did the priest just invite himself to dinner? William was almost speechless again. "Uhh," was all he could manage before Father Alba continued.

"Great! Great, it's a date. I'll bring pie and some wine... red wine should go well with the spaghetti. I can't wait to meet Gayle and the children."

Father Alba was more unstoppable than he'd first thought. William couldn't fathom how he knew any of their names but then he remembered that Will had gone to the church a few times with Lisa. He was about to comment on this, but before he could, Father Alba went on, "I forgot! I forgot in all the excitement why we're here." At this, he waved his hand grandly at the small church. In truth, William didn't know why he was there. The only thing he did know for certain about all of this was that he was going to change his cool-down route starting tomorrow.

"What do you think of my church?" Father Alba asked and this time he paused in such a significant manner that William felt compelled to answer.

The church was... nothing special. The vestibule they stood in was small and held little more than a large brass font filled with holy water. Not wanting to lie about a church while in one, he stepped into the main room.

A large center aisle between rows of pews led to the altar. The altar was square and white, above it towered a wooden crucifix on which Jesus hung in seeming agony. To William this was pretty standard stuff and was relatively unremarkable.

He turned to the priest and was about to tell him it was nice, which was the best he could do, when he noticed something on the wall behind Father Alba. It was the Stations of the Cross, which were also standard, but underneath each was a brass plaque. That was different.

He strode by the priest and went to the nearest. The station was a woodcarving of Jesus carrying his cross, and near him a girl held out a cloth. Underneath it, on the plaque was a list of names and dates.

LTJG Harry W. Woodley April 26, 1972 Training Accident
LTJG John Hudan November 8, 1974 Lost At Sea During Rescue

William had known John Hudan. They worked together for a year in South Carolina; it had been Hudan's first assignment out of the Academy.

With sad morbid interest, William then went to the first station. This showed Jesus with his hands shackled, standing in front of Pontius Pilate. He read the names under it, LTCOL Tomas Fortini and CAPT Harold Menning. They were unknown to him. After this, he went to each station in turn reading the list of names and found that he'd been friends with two other people named.

"It's the list of all the Coast Guard service men who've died on active duty while stationed here," Father Alba said with sadness. The priest then looked at William and he felt that in some way he was being tested. "Quite a long list, isn't it?"

William knew the list in Kodiak, Alaska, would've been twice as long and that would only have been counting air crews lost. Nevertheless, the list here was too long and the names that he'd known hit home painfully.

"There are at least three names here that don't fit your description," he stated. The priest nodded and his eyes told William, that he had passed his test.

Father Alba spoke, "There are four; two of which were actually the first up on the wall. As you undoubtedly figured out by the dates given, they were Army and not Coast Guard. The one that is Coast Guard, but that didn't die while on active duty here was Commander Samuels. He was our choir director for four years and was so much a part of this church." The priest paused and William wondered briefly if this final death was why he was really there. "The last was Lieutenant Olson. He was Air Force, but stationed here and died while keeping his flight time up out in Colorado."

The priest stopped talking and waited.

So it was the first two then. It was obvious what Father Alba was getting at and William sighed heavily. The priest hadn't wanted him to *See his church*, there was absolutely nothing special about it. And judging by the position the priest had taken, as William dutifully looked about, it had been the plaques he was supposed to have seen.

There had been no caption under either of the first two names and the dates were identical, June 15, 1959. It seemed likely that the men had been murdered and logic suggested that it had probably occurred in the home where the Jerns were currently living. Why else had he been singled out for this?

William suddenly felt very tired and he checked his watch. He had work to do and didn't want to have to deal with this just then and he wondered if the priest was really going to use the word *Ghost*.

The silence drew out between the two men and William knew something about Father Alba already—he hated to be quiet.

After a pause that must have felt very long to the man, the priest said, "Those first two men on the wall were killed in your home..." He again paused a long while, hoping that William would speak, but when nothing was forthcoming, Alba continued, "And under some peculiar circumstances, too. So that's why I wanted to do the blessing of the house. I also wanted to tell you here, privately so that you and your family wouldn't hear it as gossip. Do you understand?" This last he spoke in a rush.

"Thank you, that's very kind," William answered. "I do have to be going however...but if you feel the need to do the blessing, we'll see you at six tomorrow." With that, he smiled at the priest and walked out of the church into the beautiful morning.

3

As William went up the Row, he worried Father Alba would come bursting out of the church and talk his ear off, all the way home. When that didn't happen, he wondered if he'd made a mistake. The priest couldn't have known about his silly fears from that morning or even of his conversation with the Greek painter. Maybe this sort of thing was normal with a house where murders had occurred. Perhaps this was a way to set the new owner's fears to rest. Suddenly William felt moronic;

he was now sure the priest wasn't even going to mention ghosts or any of that nonsense.

He was so lost in thought that he didn't see Greg Harris, until it was too late.

"Howdy neighbor, have a good run?"

Greg Harris' overly jovial voice startled William and he gave a little jump as he saw Greg walking from his driveway. William plastered a big fake smile on his face and shook Greg's hand. "You look like you worked up quite a sweat," Greg continued.

William found small talk, painful under most circumstances, but Greg made it pure torture. They had worked together during William's tour of duty in Charleston and those had been some of the longest months of his life. Greg never had anything of interest to say, ever. Literally, everyday it had been long talks about the weather and then the traffic. Once, during an Officer's luncheon, Greg had talked about his pants for forty-five straight minutes. William would have rather gone back down in the basement and talked to his Boiler Monster than to hear Greg that morning.

However, and this had been a painful lesson to learn, in the Coast Guard you had to be careful not to make enemies. This branch of the service was very small and you never knew who was related to some admiral or who went golfing with the base captain. Greg was guilty on both accounts and in addition, he was three years senior to him, so William smiled his smile and agreed that the weather was indeed very nice.

"Yes, it was a nice run... perfect weather for it," William looked up at the sky for added emphasis.

Greg smiled agreeably and patted his bulging blue uniform coat. "Yes. You know, I should really start hitting the track. Maybe we could go running together."

He knew Greg better than that. There was no way he was ever going to go running voluntarily. From his house on the Row, Greg could walk to work in eight minutes, but he drove, every day, rain or shine. Moreover, what he drove was just as annoying as the very *fact* that he drove in the first place.

Somewhere along the line, Greg must have made a deal with the Devil, because he would tool around the island in a cherry red 1972 Corvette Stingray convertible. Every time William saw Greg in that car he'd have to contort his face into a forced smile and pick up his arm as if it weighed a hundred pounds and wave.

It was pathetic, the island's top speed limit was fifteen-miles-an-hour, which meant Greg *never* had to step on the accelerator, but instead had to keep his foot on the break the entire drive. Then there were the Aviator sunglasses he inevitably wore, as if he were a fighter pilot.

Of course, part of William's annoyance was brought on by jealousy. When Gayle was pregnant with Katie, she had somehow talked William into buying a Plymouth station wagon. It was actually a *Sport Station Wagon*, with green and brown paneling. How the word "sport" ever got associated with the thing was beyond him and looking at it, made him cringe. Gayle had chalked it up to hormones and her deep-seated wish to have a dozen children.

"Sure Greg, anytime you want to go for a run, you just let me know. I like to get moving by 0600." William knew this last was a deal breaker for his new neighbor.

"Great!" Greg lied. "How was the move? Probably the shortest distance of your career right?"

How was the move? Ugh! How was any move? William's smile started to slip.

"Good, pretty smooth with Gayle running the show. Despite the shortness of the trip, it was one of the more exhausting ones we've done," he responded. The trick with Greg was to never ask him a question and to never give him more information than was needed. At the same time you couldn't be rude and just give yes or no answers.

"That's exactly what I thought you'd say." Greg gave him a knowing look. "I can picture your day already, unpacking like crazy, moving furniture here and there, and then moving it back again... women." A sad shake of his fat face accompanied the word women. Greg looked like he was just getting warmed up verbally and William groaned inwardly. "Then there are all the pictures and paintings you have to hang and then shopping for the little things. I don't envy you. You're going to be one tired pup tonight. Am I right?"

William was tired right then just listening to him. "You got that right." He thought it was time to turn his brain off and go on autopilot. He would let the words flow over him, but the words that came next out of Greg's mouth didn't flow over him, but rather ran over him.

"That's why you're coming over tonight for dinner. Henny told me yesterday how it was going to be and she said you'd make excuses and not want to impose. But I was told to not let you wriggle off of the hook," Greg said, destroying any chance that William had of looking forward to a good day.

William panicked.

He was about to say he didn't want to impose but Greg had beat him to it. Next, he tried to think of an excuse, but nothing came to mind. Time slipped away and he was on the verge of being rude. "I'll have to talk to Gayle, just in case she has anything planned." He hoped the delaying tactic would work and that his wife could think of something in the mean time.

"Wow! That's exactly what Henny said you'd say." Greg smiled largely. "She also said Gayle was a smart girl and that she would never schedule something the day after a move. So, I will have Henny fix dinner and we'll see the five of you at six sharp! Oh, she said to ask you what you wanted. She's a great cook and can make anything."

He thought that Henny must be a good cook, judging by Greg's waistline. "Steak, that's what I'm in the mood for. I haven't had a good T-bone in ages," William said and thought: 'Well, he asked.'

Greg's smile faltered just a tiny bit. "Sure, steak it is," he agreed but wasn't quite as good-humored as before. "Your littlest daughter doesn't eat steak, does she?" Greg asked hopefully.

Katie was the same at every meal, three bites of whatever was placed in front of her and then a great big serving of talking.

"Oh yeah, she loves it." He or Will would finish anything Katie didn't. "I have to go, Greg. See you tonight." With that, he turned and went into his new home, leaving a near-speechless Greg behind.

The house was still cold and his sweat chilled on him right away. What a day it had been already. He'd gone through the back door into the kitchen and was busy making coffee, when Will came downstairs.

"Hey Dad. Do you know where the thermostat for the AC is? I can't find it anywhere." Will had dressed in two layers of pajamas.

"This house doesn't have central air. I'm calling today to get the boiler looked at," William answered. "In the meantime, I think we should find where we stored those little electric heaters that we bought on the Cape. I think they're in room B-3, according to the *Captain's* invasion maps."

Will's face went blank for a moment. "Is that the one on the right or the left?" William noticed his son still looked despondent over his break up with Lisa and it was understandable since it had only been a week. He had thought the two had made a fine pair and wondered what had happened, but Will refused to talk about it with him.

"The one on the left, do you need any help?" William asked as his son headed for the basement.

"Not from you, old man," Will said with a grin, the first his father had seen in a long while. "By the way, I have perfected an escape from your *Unbreakable Death Grip*. When you have recovered from your little jog, I think it is time you meet the new top dog around here."

"Care to wager on it?" William loved to put money on a sure thing. He thought Will was a good six months away from really testing him.

"What's the bet?" Will was always up for a challenge and William had a notion this might perk him up. In fact, he toyed with the idea of throwing the match.

William considered. "Simple: I have to get you in my patented *Unbreakable Death Grip* within five minutes or you win *and*, if you can get out of it in five minutes from the time I put it on you, you win." William always needed to be very clear on the rules when betting with his son. Will could twist words like the very devil. "And Talitha is judging, not your mother."

William knew the boy would have preferred to have his mom judge since she was extremely biased toward her son, but the terms were still very favorable to Will. "Ok," he answered quickly. "Loser has to go out on the porch... no, no the middle of the Village Green, at noon tomorrow and yell as loud as they can, *I am a little girl!* And Talitha can judge that as well."

So much for throwing the match!

Will must be confident in his technique to make such a bet. Maybe it was that five minutes, he had to put him in the death grip. Will may be thinking of just stalling, by using a very large wrestling area and just trying not to engage his dad.

"If we wrestle in the family room, it's a bet," William said and stuck out his hand. Will didn't hesitate a moment and gripped his father's hand, hard. "Now, go get those heaters. I would help, but I got to rest up you know." As his son went into the basement, the Boiler Monster strobe light image flashed into his head and the smile on his face faltered. "No more of that crap," he muttered.

Talitha came down the backstairs at that moment. She topped her brother by dressing in three layers of pajamas to his two, and wore a tired-looking scowl on her face.

"Do you know how to turn down the AC?" she asked. "I was up at 2 am trying to find the control box... oh by the way, I think the heater is malfunctioning too."

He shook his head. "We don't have central air and I'll get the boiler fixed today, I promise."

Talitha looked skeptical. "No AC?"

"Nope, just one of those old brick houses that take forever to heat up and then stay broiling until you wish for the cold again," he said. Will came up from the basement a few minutes later lugging three portable heaters in his long arms. He went to help his son, but Will pulled back.

"Don't help me, not with your bad back." As Will spoke a sly smile spread over his face.

William looked puzzled. "I don't have a bad back."

"Not yet," Will said secretively and then headed for the stairs.

William started to get a nervous.

"What's he on about, do you know?" he asked Talitha. She was going from cupboard to cupboard looking for something.

"Oh, he has some new wrestling move he's going to try on you." Talitha turned and looked at him, exasperated. "Do you know where the cereal is?"

"I'm pretty sure in the pantry." He opened a cupboard himself. "Did you see any coffee mugs?" Talitha pointed. "What's the new move?" William asked her when she came back into the kitchen carrying a box of Cheerios.

"He calls it a body lock and he tried it on Brian, and Brian said it really hurt his back."

"A body lock...never heard of it. Does he use his legs or his arms?" This could get interesting if they were both trying to put different moves on at the same time.

"Oh, he uses his legs and they wrap around the waist." Talitha's eyes narrowed. "Should I be telling you this?"

"No! That's cheating, Dad!" Will had just come down the stairs and he was quite outraged.

"It's not cheating, it's called operational intelligence," William explained. "Forewarned is forearmed."

"Well it sounds a lot like cheating to me," Talitha said and William saw then the amazing similarity between her and her mother. Besides the dark brown hair and the warm tan, there was the set of her jaw at the mere notion of wrongdoing.

"Who's cheating and at what?" Gayle strode into the kitchen carrying Katie. He smiled; this time it was Gayle who seemed to be so much like her daughter. They had struck identical poses and both were eyeing William sternly.

"Dad has been prying information... *secret* information, out of Talitha, about our big wrestling match today!" Will was a little angrier than the situation called for in William's opinion. It was another side effect of the break up, he assumed.

"Well, it isn't exactly a state secret, Willy J, so I think you should calm down," Gayle said. "And I'm afraid there'll be no time for wrestling today. We have a big day of unpacking and getting this ship in order. Now, we have one vote for French toast for breakfast, right Miss Katie?"

"Yes please!" Katie said and then wriggled down from her mom's arms. She slipped over to Talitha's side, cast a wary look to her father, and whispered, "Did it hurt, when Daddy prying-ed the stuff out of you?"

Talitha scooped up her little sister. "You're too cute!" she told her. "Is that why she can get you to make French toast, the day after moving... I mean M-Day? Because she's so stinkin cute?" Talitha asked her mother.

William loved this. He'd seen jealousy between siblings in other families and it always bothered him. His own children fought sometimes, but overall, they loved each other and showed it.

"Yes, I only do special things for my cute children. William, do something about the AC for goodness sakes." Gayle started to open cupboards, one after the other. "Has anyone seen the glass mixing bowls?"

"You just missed them," he replied, "They were way in the back of the last one. And there is no central air conditioning here, but I'm going to give James Andre a call right now. Will and Talitha please set up one heater in here and two in the dining room."

"No air?" Gayle asked, her upper body still deep in the cupboard. After a moment and some clattering, she emerged with her glass bowls. "You tell James, that if he doesn't have someone over here by the time breakfast is done, he'll be dealing with me." Gayle gave him a long look and he knew it was not an idle threat.

"Got the message loud and clear," he said to his wife. "Good news though, you don't have to cook tonight. Greg Harris has been kind enough to invite us over for a steak dinner!" Both Will and Talitha let out moans of anguish and Gayle wrinkled her nose in a combination of disgust and irritation. William understood. "I know, I know. He ambushed me and wouldn't take 'No' for an answer." He turned to his son and daughter. "Why are you two upset? It's a steak dinner, Will." It had been a long time since the Jerns had eaten steak.

Will cast his eyes down and said nothing. Talitha, acting as his advocate as usual, spoke for him, "It's Amy, their daughter. She's been hot after Will since his breakup with Lisa and she won't take 'No' for an answer either. In fact, 'No' may not be part of her extremely limited vocabulary." She gave her mom a significant look and Gayle's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh..." William was at a slight loss. "We'll still be polite, as always... and speaking of being polite. I ran into the Catholic priest right after my run and well, he invited himself to dinner tomorrow night." Gayle gave him a 'We aren't Catholic' kind of look. He smiled at her and then mentioned, "And you're to make spaghetti."

"Really? Did he get that from the Pope?" Gayle had an incredulous look to her. "Was he rude about it?"

"No, not at all. He was just impossible to say no to. He acted like he knew us and was so darn friendly."

Gayle shrugged her shoulders. "Ok, I can make spaghetti, it's cheap."

William was about to tell her about the house blessing part of their conversation but held back because the children were still in the room.

He was just standing there, thinking about the odd morning he'd had when Gayle spoke, "William. You were going to call James?"

"Did you make sure the pilot light was on?" asked Lieutenant Commander Andre a few minutes later; the question was stupid and irked William. The pilot light was the first thing any man worth his salt would check, but he held his tongue.

"Yes James. And I feel I should warn you that Gayle is in a wrath and will be heading down to your office—with my blessing—if there isn't a capable man down here to fix it in the next hour."

"William, I can't just send anyone down there. I could get, hold on." He heard James shuffling papers, and then a muffled: "Damn!" Followed by more shuffling. "Is someone going to be there pretty much all day?" James sounded a little nervous.

William instantly understood. The Greek painter had asked the same question after mentioning the house being haunted. Sure the house could be a little freaky, but these were grown men for goodness sakes. He was just about to say so when the black image flicked through his mind.

"I'll be here all day and I will personally babysit whoever you send down. I have unpacking to do anyways." If babysitting was what it took to get the boiler going, then he'd just have to babysit.

The repairman showed up about two hours later. He was tall and extremely slim. He wore blue overalls that he tucked into his boots and on his head was an old green John Deere cap. His name was Seth and he looked to have just walked in from Iowa.

Seth was very nervous and bobbed his head up and down constantly as he talked. William prepared for him by having every light in the basement blazing away. He even stole light bulbs from one of the attic rooms and laid them on top of the boiler, since the ones in there didn't seem to last.

At first, Seth worked without the encumbrance of unnecessary chitchat, which William appreciated. Seth had the boiler stripped down in minutes and then scrounged around in its innards. Soon he began to relax and started to talk, but not to William. He struck up a conversation with the boiler which he dubbed, "You ole bitch."

"What the hell is your problem, you ole bitch?" he asked and William was just getting ready to snap at the guy to watch his tongue when Seth murmured, "Oh, you got a clogged filter valve, you ole bitch? I don't think you do."

This made William hope that the problem had been solved quickly. "Is that easily fixable?"

"Ayeah. But that ain't your problem." The words sounded tinny as they echoed inside the boiler. "What's going on with you, you ole bitch?" he asked the boiler again. William waited for the repairman to elaborate, but Seth kept up his conversation with the boiler instead. "Why are all your nuts so damn rusty all ready, you ole bitch?"

"William!" Gayle called down from the kitchen. "I need a hand up here." She'd been busy unpacking and directing the unpacking of the children.

"Oh, hey!" Seth pulled his long body out of the boiler in a flash. "Oh hey...ah Captain...ah, I might need you to help me here with some stuff, ok?" Back to being nervous, he began to bob his head up and down again.

Ignoring the incorrect rank, William put his hands out wide to reassure him. "I'm not going anywhere until you're done." He then went to the doorway and yelled up to Gayle, "I can't just yet honey, I'm needed down here."

Seth waited to see if William was going to actually stay. He stood there with his head gently nodding and it was only when they heard Gayle say distantly, "Ok," that he dove back into the boiler. An hour of constant scraping, and adjusting, and numerous utterances of the phrase, "you ole bitch" went by before Seth pulled his head out.

"Ok, I just need to get a bi-metallic strip and she'll be as good as new."

William wanted to tell Seth, the boiler was already new, but asked instead, "Will that take long?"

"Oh, it'll be late this afternoon before I can get it and get back... you'll still be here, right?" The nervousness lay just below the surface of the question.

"Yes, but please hurry."

Seth left quickly and William went to help with the unpacking. It turned into another very long day for the family. There seemed to be an endless supply of boxes to be emptied and furniture to be shifted, first here and then there, and then back again, just as Greg Harris had said. Pictures needed to be hung and dishes shelved.

Other than Katie, the children were a big help and seemed constantly in motion. Katie insisted on finding the box containing the Halloween costumes and spent the entire day skipping about underfoot as Little Red Riding Hood.

It was nearly four when Seth came back.

He worked quickly, but would've been quicker still, if he hadn't checked his watch every other minute. William kept close in order to keep the repairman reassured with his presence. Finally with 5 o'clock nearing, Seth had the boiler put back together and went upstairs to the thermostat to test it. William was fearful that it wouldn't start, but it roared to life after only a moment.

"Hey... ah Captain? Can you bring my tools up?" Seth called from the top of the stairs. William turned from the boiler and was just reaching down for the metal toolbox, when the light flickered once and went out. He froze in place. His eyes went wide trying to adjust to the sudden darkness. Unbelievably, the fear he had felt that morning came back and he felt a trace of panic run through him.

Quickly his ears began consciously sifting through all of the noises around him, his mind registering each and tagging them as friendly or unknown. The voices from upstairs seemed now very far away and there was a muffled quality to their sound. His eyes shifted to the boiler room door... it was no longer open. It had been open a moment before, he had been looking at it when Seth had called down, but now it was shut tight and he had the horrible notion that if he tried the knob, it wouldn't turn. The panic became more urgent as a terrible feeling began to creep over him—there was something in the room.

It wasn't possible. But he felt it nonetheless. His back was to the boiler and there was something behind him and to the right. He was close to bolting for the door when he heard Seth's footsteps come down two of the stairs.

"Hey... ah, Captain... ah?" Seth began to say, but Gayle's voice murmured something. "I mean, Commander? Could you bring up my tools?" William could picture the tall man squatting at the top of the stairs.

The sound of Seth's voice and perhaps more, the noise of his boots on the stairs had, as if by magic, dispelled William's fears. He took a deep breath, looked around into the gloom, and saw nothing. Crossing to the door, he opened it and the light from the hallway streaming in, seeming to bring with it fresh air. He glanced back into the room and shook his head in wonder at himself.

"Yeah," he called up to Seth. "I'll get them for you." William turned, and now the depths of the boiler room seemed inky black compared to the brightness of the hall. The boiler itself was a large dark outline and he could only barely make out the toolbox on the floor near it.

"Wow!" he said to himself. Then raising his voice, he called up stairs, "Gayle! Your husband is being an idiot!"

"Good that you can finally admit," she replied.

He smiled, but it was part grimace. The big man went to the boiler and stood in front of the roaring hunk of metal, shaking his head. Finally, he reached up on top of it and fished around for one of the light bulbs. Just as he was screwing it in the image from earlier, popped into his head and he paused; the mental picture of the black thing lingered in his mind.

"No! No more messing around!" he said harshly as he gave the bulb a few hard twists. Light flooded the room.

William was extremely angry with himself, but also worried. He'd always prided himself on his courage, but now twice in one day he had been afraid of the dark! The thought occurred to him that he had been too long on shore. He felt he needed to get back on the water and test himself against nature's harshest elements.

There had been many times during rescue operations when he had seen fear in the eyes of his men, but he'd always been able to cast aside his own doubts. However, it had now been four years since his last blue water assignment, and the idea that he was beginning to become shy, bothered him.

He didn't sit in the dark this time. It would be a waste of time, so he grabbed up the toolbox and went upstairs. Seth bobbed his head as a goodbye and William headed to the shower to get ready for dinner. When he finished, he noticed that the house had warmed perceptibly.

"Well the ole bitch is working now!" he observed.

"Who is working what when?" Gayle stood in the doorway. She looked tired after the long days of hard labor and he knew she was dreading this dinner almost as much as he. Gayle barely knew either Greg or Henny, but she knew enough to know this was going to a long night. She wore a simple knee length, flowered dress and cast her eyes at his blue jeans with slight disapproval.

"I was referring to our boiler, the repair man has named it that, and to tell the truth, it seems fitting."

"Will it be fitting when Katie starts telling her friends that her house has an Ole Bitch in it?" She smiled at him. It was a tired smile but he could tell that she was also happy.

"Billy the Boiler it is then!" He gave his wife a quick kiss, smacked her on the bottom, and pushed her out the door. "Children. Time to go!" he bellowed so that the whole house could hear, although he need not have since they were all sitting in the living room waiting.

Gayle gave each of her children a quick once over. "Katie, Little Red has to stay here. Take off the cape, please." Katie stuck out her lower lip, but pulled the cape off.

5

Except for the houses on either end, all of the homes on Colonels Row had the same design and floor plan, but it was only the exterior of the Harris house, which truly resembled the rest.

Greg greeted the Jerns at the door and William made sure to keep his face neutral as he entered. It appeared the home had been professionally decorated. The hardwood floors in the living room were carpeted over in light gold, deep and soft. The drapes, an even lighter shade of the gold, complemented the carpet perfectly. The walls shone in a fine color of red, while the crown molding and baseboards contrasted with a delicate red/gold leaf pattern.

The furniture added to the sumptuousness of the room. William would find out later from Gayle that the style of the four pieces was French Colonial. They were upholstered in a light cream which accented the dark wood.

After the Jern's entered and had given their proper greetings, complete with the obligatory phrases: "I hope you didn't go to too much trouble, and dinner smells great!" Greg asked them to have a seat in the living room since Henny wasn't quite ready. They had a choice of a couch, love seat, a single chair, and something William couldn't ever imagine sitting on.

It looked to be a combination of a chair and a small bed and the idea of reclining on the thing seemed ridiculous to him. If Gayle had been wearing a toga and hand-feeding him grapes, then maybe he would've given it a shot. He steered his wife to the couch and she gave him a look, heavy with meaning.

Gayle liked to people watch and once when they had gone out to eat, she had observed the fact that the older a couple was, the less likely they were to talk while in a restaurant. Her theory was that due to the loudness of the room around them they couldn't hear each other and had long ago got tired of saying, "What did you say dear?"

William thought otherwise. They still spoke just as much, but used body language to communicate. He could imagine people holding long conversations, using the simplest of gestures and Gayle and he were already accumulating their own nonverbal code.

Holy Crap! Look at this place! Gayle exclaimed, using only a widening of her eyes, followed by quick glance about.

I know. Be cool about it, he responded by way of the tiniest nod combined with a slight down turn of his lips. He suddenly felt a touch of despondency at not being able to furnish his own home this way. Gayle and he had been together for so long now that she immediately picked up on this.

It's ok, dear. You're a good husband and father, and I love you, she made this known by rubbing his back in a circular motion twice, followed by a quick couple of pats.

His look in return, brief eye contact, a very slight rise to the eyebrows and then downcast eyes, told her, *I know, but still...*

Will wasn't quite so inconspicuous with his non-verbal communication. Not only did his eyes say, *Wow*, but his lips actually mouthed the word. Talitha stared openly, however not in admiration. She inspected the room, first as a whole, taking in the opulence but then at each object in turn.

She had fantastic perception and could see and speak about the details of objects and people with amazing clarity. Her eyes hung the longest on the three pieces of art in the room. William had no sense for art and other than the Mona Lisa, couldn't name another piece, he also considered any man that could to be highly suspect.

"These two are reproductions, but still nice," Talitha commented on two different pictures of flowers. "Unless you actually own a Renoir print?" she asked Greg. His smile dipped at the corners and he just shook his head no, in the slightest manner. "But this one..." She paused and studied it from a few different angles, "...no edition numbering... this is a one of kind."

"Yes!" Greg exclaimed with delight. "It's a Caesar Fantin!" Greg could not be more suspect in William's book.

"Never heard of him," Talitha said evenly. "His strokes are so blatant, it's no wonder it was never sent to print. The piece clashes with the other two as well. I'd move it to another room." With that she smiled a disarming smile at a flabbergasted Greg and sat down next to her father.

"I love these drapes, Greg," Gayle mentioned after shooting her daughter a sharp look. They talked a while about the drapes as if they could be interesting to anyone.

William didn't know blatant strokes from subtle ones, but it was nice to see someone as pretentious as Greg, shown to be the phony he was, by a sixteen year old. Movement caught his eye, Katie had begun climbing up on the chair/bed and William had just turned to pull her down, when Henny chose to make her *Grand Entrance*.

It could only be described as such, since she tapped her feet loudly at the top of the stairs in order to announce herself. William watched as everyone's head turned to look up, just as Henny had intended. His did not, instead he caught Talitha's eye, and they shared a quick smile. Not to be rude, he stood up and turned to watch Henrietta "Henny" Harris slowly descending their great sweeping staircase.

Henny was a beautiful woman and the opposite of her dull and doughy husband. She had long thick black hair that hung down her back and lay across her shoulders in gentle waves. Her skin tone, a perfect and perpetual tan showed off her flashing white teeth to their fullest. Her eyes were as black as her hair and she tended to look down her long nose with them half closed in a suggestive manner.

Everything about her was suggestive.

Tonight was no different. She was terribly overdressed for the occasion, wearing a black cocktail dress that would have been more appropriate at the "Plaza" than dinner with the neighbors. The dress was almost too inappropriate in another way as well. She practically fell out of the top of it and with each slow downward step, her full breasts swayed and danced provocatively. It was hypnotic and only after

she reached the first landing did William realize that it would be proper to perhaps look at something else. He pulled his eyes away from her and looked over at Will.

He was mesmerized as well. His mouth hung open and his head bobbed up and down in time with each of her deliberate steps. Embarrassed for his son, he went to give Gayle a smile, but her eyes were locked on Henny. They weren't mesmerized however, they were flinty, and her jaw was set tight, the muscles of her face pronounced.

Still not trusting himself to look in Henny's direction, he turned and saw Katie frozen in place. She had been bouncing up and down on the odd chair/bed and was currently standing full on it; her little mouth lay open in a little "O."

Talitha was the only one not sucked into the visual abundance of Mrs. Harris. A smile that seemed full of understanding played about her lips. She caught her father's eye again but William turned away. He was embarrassed to have felt a sudden fullness in his groin at the sight of Henny coming down the stairs and he knew that Talitha could be too perceptive sometimes.

"Mrs. Jern, Commander Jern, thank you for coming tonight," Henny greeted them. He looked back at her and through a concentration of will, looked her in the eye.

Gayle spoke for the family, "Henny, it's so good to see you again. You look wonderful as always." Gayle beamed at Henny, but William knew Gayle well enough to know that she was a little irate. It was the way she held her head off angle instead of full on.

"Thank you." Henny beamed right back with a radiant smile. "You look beautiful as well...so natural."

Gayle's turned a slight bit more away, now nearly looking down her shoulder at Henny almost dismissively. She hadn't expected a formal dinner at the end of such a long day and as such, she wore very little makeup and her hair had only been brushed out. Henny's words were correct however, Gayle had a very natural beauty about her. It was the tone however, that set Gayle's teeth on edge. The tone Henny used suggested that Gayle was plain in her naturalness.

"Commander Jern," Henny continued, as she walked over to him. She had beautiful white teeth. Her tongue came out delicately to moisten her lips. Erotic. He had the same feeling the other two times he had met her—erotic. "It's been so long."

He smiled and nodded but was puzzled; it's been so long since what? William didn't know exactly what, but he suddenly felt a powerful sense of guilt. He turned to his wife with an odd desire to proclaim his innocence, however the feeling died quickly as he suddenly saw just how old his wife appeared. With her standing next to Henny, the slight wrinkles around the eyes, and the few grey hairs, stood out in a way he never noticed before. He got the feeling that Henny had been blessed in some way; the two ladies were only months apart in age, but Henny looked a good twelve to fifteen years younger.

Henny had moved on, as these thoughts raced through his head and had turned to Will. "Look at this handsome young giant, you must be Will Junior. How do you do?"

Will's ears turned a dark shade of red, but he managed a very audible, "I'm fine, Mrs. Harris. Thank you for having us."

"Talitha? Right?" Henny asked as she turned toward William's oldest daughter. Henny held out her hand to Talitha. After a quick puzzled frown slipped over her face, Talitha reached out and shook Henny's hand. There was a moment of silence as the two stood shaking hands. It was a short moment, but an odd one and Henny broke it by saying, "You are the very image of your mother... so beautiful."

"Thank you, Mrs. Harris," Talitha replied without any hint of emotion. "I like your home. It's so wonderfully appointed."

"Well, we don't want dinner to get cold do we?" Greg stepped in. "I'm positively starving to death! Amy! Dinner!" he called upstairs.

"I'm not ready yet!" Amy screamed back down angrily. William was amazed that she would talk to her father like that and no one spoke for an uncomfortable couple of seconds until Katie filled the silence.

"Mr. Harris, sir? Are you from African?" she asked Greg sweetly, still standing on the chair/ bed. Startled by the sight, William took two large steps and snatched her off it.

"I think you mean, are you from *Africa*?" Greg corrected her, smiling at the cute little girl. "And no I'm not. I'm from Delaware. Why do you ask?"

"Because you have skinny arms and a big belly, just like those kids from Africa," Katie said, with wonderful innocence. "Miss Canaday told us they were all starving to death too, just like you." William eyes shifted away from Greg's face in a hurry. He saw his son suck in his cheeks and bite down, and Will then turned away to "study" the art better. Talitha, with a surprised look of pleasure on her face did the same.

William suddenly realized that if Katie and Talitha kept this up, the family might never be invited back over for dinner.

Interesting.

He turned back to Greg with a slight smile on his lips.

"Well, I'm not starving exactly," Greg said, stating the obvious with precision. "It's really a figure of speech."

"What's a fig...?" Katie began, but Gayle was smooth, practiced at dealing with Katie, and cut her off before more damage occurred.

"It's just a saying, dear. Henny, I love what you've done with the place. Do you mind showing me the kitchen? Ours is a bit of a disappointment."

"I'd love too," Henny replied. William noticed, with a slight dampening of his spirits, that Henny was not unhappy with Katie's question at all. She had a small smile on her face and there was a hint of nastiness to it directed at Greg.

Henny commenced to act as their tour guide, but instead of heading to the kitchen, she went directly up stairs. With the only other choice being to stay behind and talking to Greg, everyone trooped up after Henny, following her about the house.

She pointed out different features of the home and who painted what picture and what country a certain piece of furniture came from. The family room, an exact replica in size and shape as the Jern's, had been styled using a safari theme. The walls were adorned with the heads of a number of creatures, including a goat's head. He had seen this before, in other homes and had wondered how much sport there was to hunting goats?

He did like the full body of a bobcat that was positioned in mid-spring, just to the right of the doorway. It looked wonderfully life-like and Katie eyed it eagerly.

"Can I please pet the little lion, Mrs. Harris?" she asked as sweetly as she could.

"You'd better not, dear. He's cranky today." Henny reached out and held Katie's hand, just in case. The carpeting of the room was in a cream that matched the walls and the two larger pieces of furniture were wicker, with a brown and white pattern, while the two smaller chairs were covered in Leopard print. The room had an odd museum quality to it and William was sure it was rarely used.

Henny was especially interested in showing off the small room just to the right of the master bedroom. She had turned it into a combination dressing room and makeup room. One of the walls hung completely covered over, ceiling to floor, with a tremendous mirror. Another wall held a long bench that one would normally see in a dressing room at a Broadway theater. There were three stations for applying makeup or styling hair, each with triple mirrors and intense lighting.

"Talitha. Come in, please," Henny said with excitement.

Talitha had been lurking in the rear of the group for most of the short tour. Henny went to her and grasping her hand brought Talitha full into the room. "This will be fun," Henny stated. "Sit in this chair." She gave Talitha the smallest shove toward the middle station.

When Talitha had seated herself, Henny flicked on the bright lights and the girl blinked in surprise. The three mirrors showed off her pretty face each from slightly different angles.

Henny stared into the mirrors at her, but Talitha, never one who felt the need to glance into a mirror every time an opportunity presented itself, examined the make-up station to her right instead, it seemed to have every color of lipstick invented, lined up in neat little compartments. Henny put both hands on Talitha's cheeks and physically pointed her head straight forward so that Talitha had to look at her own face.

"Hmmm," Henny considered for a moment and then reached down and picked up the only item at the station. It was a new hairbrush, she gave it a quick look, and without asking permission she proceeded to brush out Talitha's thick brown hair.

The girl's mouth came open to protest, but she caught her mother's reflection. Gayle's face told her, *You are a guest here. Go with it.* Talitha read it properly and swallowed whatever she was going to say, replacing it with a smile.

Henny worked the brush methodically and after a minute she stopped and studied Talitha. "You have such gorgeous hair, you really need to start doing more with it," she suggested in a friendly manner. Henny smiled at the girl, but it suddenly froze on her lips and her face became tight. "I mean..." she started to say and then looked down at the hairbrush, twirling it slowly. With quick movements, Henny put Talitha's hair into a ponytail that was sloppy at best. "I mean, I think I overstepped my bounds here, I'm so sorry Gayle," she apologized, but her tone was flat and lacked sincerity. "Hey, I bet Amy is ready for dinner."

With that the tour ended abruptly, which was fine with William.

Seeing the ostentatious opulence had grated on him. They headed down to the dining room by way of the back stairs. Gayle had wanted to see the kitchen, but Henny seemed to have forgotten this and breezed right through it. The kitchen was

very similar to their own. It had received no special attention and the appliances were mismatched. The room was obviously not to be viewed by guests and William felt as though he had just peeked behind the curtain and had seen the "Great Oz," in all his indecent humanity.

However, the moment passed as soon as they entered the dining room, he was right back in the Emerald City.

The dining room table was so huge it nearly didn't fit the room, and the room was not a small one. The wood of the table and the matching sixteen chairs was a deep rich brown. The place settings for the two families were spread out about the table, so that William at one end was easily fourteen feet away from Greg, at the other.

This would've suited him just fine, except that Gayle was quite far away, just to Greg's right. With Henny just across and slightly to her left, William had a fine view of both women.

Gayle sat smiling at her daughter in an amused fashion. It was a warm smile and honest. Talitha was trying in the most unobtrusive manner possible, to pull the silly ponytail out of her hair, she kept pretending to yawn and stretch, giving it a quick tug on each occasion. Gayle's happy looks to her daughter radiated genuine love and it increased the naturalness of her beauty.

Henny, on the other side of the table seemed relieved and relaxed, as if she had performed some burdensome task. She sipped unobtrusively at a glass of wine, no longer the center of attention and it was oddly enough at this moment that William found her most attractive.

Normally she had an unnatural beauty about her; she seemed to be an imitation of loveliness. She powerfully aroused his body, but his mind rejected her looks instinctively. The moment passed however when she said in an irritated voice, "It's about time!"

Amy had finally made her appearance. She stood in the archway between the living and dining rooms, as if waiting for applause. The grating sound of her mother's voice sent her large smile, crashing into an immediate frown.

"I have to look good for our guests, Mother." Her eyes flashed angrily for a moment but then her smile snapped back in place. "And isn't that what you always taught me?"

"You're so right." Henny's smile and pleasant demeanor came back as well. "Dinner everyone." The table was littered with covered dishes from which many delectable smells emanated.

William had smelled the steak as soon as they entered the house and he had forced himself to concentrate on something besides his stomach. All through the tour, he had fought the urge to breathe in deeply and sigh loudly. Their dinner the night before had been Spaghetti Os and the French toast for breakfast hadn't been Gayle's best. The buttermilk, though just opened, had been sour and nobody could find the moving box which contained the syrup.

Henny stay seated and chatted with Gayle, as Greg served everyone in turn. When their plates were full, an awkward moment ensued as each family waited to see if the other was going to say a prayer or Grace. With nothing forth coming, Greg unceremoniously said, "Dig In!" He commenced to attack his steak with undisguised gluttony. A spasm of disgust slipped out from behind Henny's mask

of pleasantness and her face soured briefly. But it lasted less than a second and no one other than William noted it.

As families, the Jerns and the Harris' had never been more than acquaintances. William had studiously avoided Greg whenever possible, while Gayle and Henny had always traveled in much different circles.

Despite the lack of mingling between the two families, the Coast Guard was such a small service that they were all relatively well acquainted with each other. There was something William and Gayle had never understood about Henny; what could she possibly see in Greg? Gayle had always insisted it was Greg's money, but William knew that he wasn't in fact rich.

His father, a retired Admiral, was supposedly very wealthy and Greg spoke at length of his coming inheritance to anyone who would listen. William got the impression that Greg's father had been handing out his money in dribs and drabs to his only child. The admiral probably knew that if he gave out any real money, Greg would immediately quit working. All of this meant that if Henny was in the relationship for money, she was the most patient woman imaginable.

"So Greg, how's the Admiral doing these days?" William asked. He hadn't had a real conversation with Greg in a couple of years and judging by the expensive furnishings and the Corvette, William considered it likely that the inheritance had finally kicked in.

Around a mouthful of steak, Greg said, "Still alive and kicking. Well not much kicking these days, he broke his hip just before last Christmas." Greg suddenly laughed loudly and incongruously and William had an unfortunate view of the food Greg was currently chewing.

Gayle looked at William and her eyes asked him, *Did I miss the punch line to a joke about an old man with a broken hip?*

When he finished chuckling, Greg took another large bite of food and explained what he thought was so funny, "The old man has these three female caretakers, and he insists that they dye their hair blonde! Ha Ha!" Greg laughed some more and William smiled and nodded in what he hoped was not too phony a manner.

Purposely, Katie took a large mouthful of food and said in her little voice, as deep as she could make it, "Blonde hair, Ha! Ha!" She had a wonderful ear for mimicry, and this little throwaway line was actually funny. Everyone smiled or gave a quick laugh, even Greg. William looked down quickly, he didn't want to see the spinach Greg had just put into his mouth.

After a moment he asked Greg, "Is he still in the hospital?"

Henny answered, "No, he's in some sort of swanky daycare for the rich and ancient." Henny wasn't bothering to hide many of her true feelings tonight. She obviously hated her father-in-law and her feelings toward her husband bordered on loathing. "So don't worry about him, it doesn't seem like he'll ever die, at least not until the Devil himself comes for him." She gave a smirk to her glass of wine and drained it.

"It's true," Greg agreed, unfortunately not between bites. "Both of his parents lived past a hundred, so he could be with us another twenty years or more!" Henny looked as if she had just swallowed something nasty.

Well that explained a few things to William and judging by the frozen smile on Gayle's face she had caught on too. Greg hadn't come into any money; he had

simply picked up some of his father's furniture, when he had moved to an assisted living facility. The shocking thing however, was how obvious Henny was being. If there had been any question before about whether she was a gold digger, it had just been answered.

William decided he'd not had enough wine and took a long pull at his glass. He almost choked on it when Amy said to Katie, "So how do you like living with the ghosts?"

William had successfully put aside his silly *feelings* and hadn't thought about his phantom Boiler Monster since his moment in the basement. At the question though, a thrill went up his back and the image blinked into his mind. Damn! He looked over at Amy and felt his anger rise. Her resemblance to her mother was as obvious as it was unfortunate. She was young, nubile and pretty, but in a skanky unwholesome manner and she was currently wearing a nasty, mischievous grin aimed at his six-year-old daughter.

Katie glared back with a look of anger and disbelief. "There's no such thing as ghosts," irritation coloring her voice. "Right, Mom? There's no such thing as ghosts?"

Just then, the strobe light, negative image of the lurking black creature came back to William again. He felt his chest tighten. Looking around him, seeing the calm expression of amusement in the faces of the Harris family and the slight anger in the faces of his own family, made him realize he was the only one with this feeling of fear.

"Katie-bunny, there is no such thing as ghosts," Gayle replied with a tired, but reassuring smile. The long couple of days, plus the steak, and the wine were starting to weigh her down.

"See," Katie said smugly. "And really, they aren't scary anyways, they're like Casper. And I don't see why everyone gets all ascares." She looked across to Talitha and smiled. "It's a ga... ga... ga... Ghost! Right, Tal? Tal and I both think he is kinda cute." Whenever she was in doubt, Katie liked to drag her big sister in on conversations. Talitha gave her a nod. The little girl continued, "And on Scooby Doo the ghosts aren't even real, on-a cuz, it's always some mean old man." Katie paused and turned her head the slightest bit toward Greg and cast a look at him out of the corner of her eye. He was shoveling his second helping of dinner into his mouth and took no notice. Katie continued but in a slightly quieter voice as if what she was saying could be found offensive, "So there aren't no such things as ghosts and if there were, they'd either be cute or fake." Katie felt her logic to be well founded and looked down her tiny nose at Amy, dismissively.

"That's only on TV," Amy spoke with a superior air. "My mother saw..."

"Amy!" Henny said sharply and then softened, "Dear, that's enough. You don't want to scare the little one with silly stories." Her eyes flashed daggers at Amy, but then went to Talitha. "Talitha, I've heard that you are a... ah, a girl with high moral standards. You know—a good girl? Our last neighbors, the Nelsons, their daughter was quite the tramp." This statement was greeted with looks that darted back and forth across the table. What were they expected to say to that? Henny drained her wine glass again and looked expectantly at Talitha.

"I think you can rest assured that not only is Talitha a good girl, I like to think of her as the best girl," William gave his oldest daughter a smile.

"What about me?" Katie asked in alarm. "Can I be the best girl too?"

Katie was closest to him, so that she got an arm pat and a warm smile. "Of course you're the best girl too, sugar bottom."

"I don't have a sugar bottom," Katie announced with a quick glance toward Amy. It was clear Katie thought Amy might actually believe she could indeed have a sugar bottom.

"Well that's something," Henny said as she poured herself another glass of wine. "I'm glad my new neighbors won't be influencing my sweet Amy into being naughty." She then smiled all around. William smiled back, but when he glanced down the table, Talitha's face was set neutrally but also set in stone and Will's face was completely expressionless.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about." Gayle had a smile pulling at the corners of her lips as she said this. William had only found out that morning that Amy was a slut, but he wasn't the last to know. Greg had been so engrossed with his meal that he missed not only the looks, but the entire conversation as well.

Moments later however, Greg finally stopped eating and William braced himself mentally for the coming onslaught.

"You know what I think is the neatest thing?" Greg paused and looked around, just in case any of the Jerns were mind readers and knew what he thought was the neatest thing. "I think it's just so neat that in June, you can still feel the crispness and coolness in the mornings."

William was feeling a little worn out from the move and having Greg start in on the weather, caused his brain to shift into neutral. He quickly started to feel sleepy and to combat it he attacked the remainder of his food with gusto. However, he was soon full and the sleepiness came back even more powerfully.

He suddenly remembered the story of Rip Van Winkle. It was about a fellow who fell asleep for twenty years and woke up with his beard grown down to his toes. Subconsciously, William reached up and rubbed at his chin. It had only a little stubble on it, but there was still time. With Greg, talking about the weather, there was all the time in the world.

After what felt like a very long while, he glanced over at Katie and half expected her to be grown up, but she hadn't grown perceptibly and was currently trying to build a pyramid with her peas. Will made a small noise to get her attention and demonstrated, how with a small bit of mashed potatoes acting as mortar, she could build a stronger pyramid. His was quite large, four inches tall and the apex wasn't yet completed.

"This is perfect weather for sailing too. The wind is constant and not too strong. I don't actually sail and don't like boats in general..." Greg continued, almost without pause for breath. Gayle sat glassy eyed, her focus had slid off of his face, and she was currently staring at his large abdomen. William felt his chin again, and the stubble was definitely longer. He wondered how long it had been since anyone else had said anything, fifteen minutes at least, maybe an hour, it was hard to tell.

He forced his eyes up to Greg's face and Greg snatched them. William was in that terrible position where it would be rude to look away. So he nodded sagely,

hoping that Greg would turn his focus elsewhere. Greg was saying something now about underground weather and William felt that he couldn't last much longer.

He went with a desperate ploy; when reaching for his drink he 'accidentally' knocked over his napkin ring. He bent down to retrieve it and with Greg's eyes momentarily off him he felt a little better, but the endless droning was still in his ears and he knew he couldn't spend the entire evening down there beneath the table, he would have to surface at some point.

"She must have gone to poop."

William straightened up in his chair. Katie had just said something, he was sure of it. Feeling sleepy and dull-witted William looked over at his youngest daughter. Did she just say poop?

"Tell me Mr. Harris, do you wipe?" Katie asked conversationally. William looked around. Henny was nowhere to be seen; Amy and Will were both staring absentmindedly at Amy's breasts, Gayle looking as if she had just woke up, was gazing at Katie with an extremely bewildered expression, and Talitha was grinning a mischievous grin.

The little girl's question had nothing whatsoever to do with Greg's current rambling and he was slow to respond. So Katie filled the verbal void, "I only ask on-a-cuz of Brandon Wilcove...you know Brandon? A boy in my class..." Her expression suggested Greg was stupid for not knowing the different boys in her class. "*Anyway*, he said that boys don't wipe after they pee, on-a-cuz they stand up to pee." Katie paused politely for any comments, but since none were forthcoming from the disorientated people around the table, she expounded on her topic, "I think he is a liar on-a-cuz when I pee standing up, I have to wipe... *a lot!*"

Gayle's eyes widened and she looked a little frantic. "Honey? Ah... ah..." Her eyes now began to flick from her daughter and then to Greg repeatedly. "When did you try this ah... standing up peeing?"

"Just now, Mr. Greg was talking about underground rivers so much, it made me have to go pee." When Gayle closed her eyes hard and began to rub her forehead, Katie must have sensed her mother's frustration so she added, "But don't worry, I cleaned up the mess really good. It's just Miss Henny will have to wash the yellow towels on-a-cuz they are all wet." She paused, but there was only silence, "On-a-cuz of the pee..." she went on helpfully. Katie looked at everyone in turn and waited for a response but the room was silent.

Greg's face appeared comically frozen in surprise, while Gayle kept looking from Katie to William, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.

Amy had been looking disgusted, but then shock and outrage widened her eyes. "The *yellow towels*? Did you use my bathroom?"

It was then that Henny came in carrying a pie. "Who's hungry for lemon meringue?"

Talitha smiled and nodded her head up and down slowly, "Perfect," was all she said.

Chapter 7

Will and the First Body.

May 27- June 4th

1

The day after Lisa broke up with him and still five days before M-Day, Will went looking for answers.

"Mom! Your *other* daughter just told me she has been trying to toast quarters! I thought you would like to know." Talitha's voice called out in the tiny apartment and Will oriented on it.

If anyone knew what was going on with Lisa, it would be Talitha. Within seconds, he cornered her in the tiny room she shared with Katie. "What the hell is wrong with Lisa?"

Talitha, who was sitting on her bed, looked up at him from her book. "Did she breakup with you?"

"How did you know? Did you have anything to do with this?"

This was preposterous and he knew it, but his anger was in charge at the moment and it was very great and his thinking tended to diminish at such times. Will stood over Talitha, towered over her over in fact, and looked to be on the verge of exploding.

"No, that was all you," she replied coolly. She didn't fear him in the least and calmly marked her place in the book. "And before you ask, we did not discuss it either. It was just obvious from your manner, coupled with the trajectory of your relationship."

"The trajectory!" He slammed his hand down on her dresser. "Love is not about science, Tal! It's... It's..." he began to splutter. "It's..." Now he cast about the room for the answer, but none was forthcoming. Talitha still remained exasperatingly calm and Will found he couldn't finish his sentence. The rage wilted within him and turning away from her, he leaned his head against the wall. It was cool and made him feel the slightest bit better.

"Will, smarter people than the two of us have been trying to put the concept into words since love was invented."

The sadness that would come to define half of his waking life, replaced the anger, and tears sprang up in Will's eyes, but there was a smile on his lips. "But only you would try to describe it scientifically." He sniffled loudly and went and sat down next to her on the bed. The mattress settled deeply under his weight and the springs creaked noisily.

"Though trajectories are mathematically based, there are enough variables in this case for me to accept your 'science' assertion." Seeing his blank look she added, "Love is a trajectory of sorts. Picture the average teen romance." She caught up one of her ever-present notebooks. "The passion is fiery, but generally brief, without consideration for any of the obvious variables, so..." She drew a shallow arc on an empty page and it ended in a small explosion. "Its demise and subsequent crash are virtually guaranteed. Note however the trajectory did not go very high and thus none of the individuals are likely to be too hurt. Now, picture mom and dad's relationship."

"I'd rather not thank you very much," he responded. His tears had stopped, but still lay heavy on his eyelashes. Talitha looked at her brother and smiled at his little joke and her smile held love for him.

"Ok, take your mind out of the gutter," she said while drawing a circle, which Will guessed represented the earth. She then drew a line that at first arced high, but then leveled so that it wound around the outside of the circle. "This is mom and dad's trajectory. They've attained orbital velocity," she paused and grimaced slightly. "I think I went too far with the science terms with that. What I mean to say is that due to their passion and inertia they will never crash. Their love will easily overcome all of the obstacles or variables that might otherwise cause them to crash."

"What kind of variables are you talking about?" He sniffled again. The calm rational way Talitha was going on caused him to start to relax.

"Oh, the variables are too many to count let alone name, but consider, what causes most relationships to fail? Don't count sluts or... what is the term, in common parlance for the male version of a slut?" Talitha seemed genuinely interested in the answer.

"I think the term you are looking for is Boy or Man," he answered with a smile and she laughed and punched his arm.

"No I'm being serious, they don't use the term *Gigolo*, do they?"

"By *they*, do you mean normal kids, unlike you?" Will asked.

"Yes," she answered expectantly.

Will shook his head and smiled at his odd sister. He realized he was beginning to feel like himself again, and this immediately made him feel sad as if he didn't have a right to feel that way. "Other than jerk, there really isn't a term."

Talitha looked unsurprised. "I thought as much, another double standard." She sighed and then continued, "Where was I? Oh, the trajectory for every relationship, successful or not, begins the same way: Interest *I*, excitement *E*, and passion *P*-these all give impetus or energy to the relationship, which we will mark with an *L* for lift." She marked a curved line with a short equation, $I+E+P=L$ (Lift/love).

"But every romance faces degradation in its velocity which reduces the lift. This could be a rumor of cheating *C*, or a *boy*," here she eyed her brother with an eyebrow cocked, "being grounded for poor grades *G*, or even pressure *Pr* from friends or family. Do you understand?" she asked holding up her notebook with the equation written on it: $I+E+P-(C \text{ cheating} + G \text{ grounding} + Pr \text{ pressure}) = L$. He had been following her just fine until she held up her notebook.

Will had to pause a long while to try to read the tiny notes along the curved path.

"Yes, but Lisa and me had all the right... uh plusses? I mean we had more lift or is the *L* supposed to be Love?"

"First off, it's *Lisa and I*," she explained with great patience. "Second, the *L* really means both, the trajectory is the relationship and the *L* is either lift or Love and is what moves it along. Now as for your trajectory, many *plusses*, as you call them and very few obvious negatives, would suggest a long lasting relationship. However, take a look at your and Lisa's *intended arc*." She drew another circle and from that she traced a high arc that carried well around it. Next, she drew a second arc that kept very close to the circle itself.

"Can you guess which is your arc? Lisa wants to let your relationship go as far as it will take you. But your arc suggests a fling or a summer romance."

"This is crap!" he fired back. "Your assumptions are baseless."

"Really? What did you tell Lisa you wanted to do after high school?" Will didn't say anything but looked away and she continued, "You told me you wanted to go to the Coast Guard Academy and with dad's help you were 90% likely to get in and in fact, I know the paperwork is being prepared. But you told her you didn't know what you wanted to do. Pretty much the most important decision you might ever make and you keep her out of it."

"Look, I'm damned either way. If I tell her I'll be lucky to see her two months out of the year, for the next four years, do you think she'll want to stay with me?"

"Mom stayed with dad for his last three years at the Academy. That should be her choice, not yours." Talitha was just getting started, "When was the last time, if ever, you bought her flowers for no special reason?"

"I uh..."

"At birthdays and holidays you act as if you have to buy her gifts, you should want to, simply to make her happy." Talitha looked as if she could go on but Will didn't want her to.

"Am I really that bad of a boyfriend?" He had thought he had been pretty good to Lisa, but looking back, he wondered why she ever loved him.

"Actually you're a great boyfriend." Talitha stated this as if it were a fact. This caused him to look at her in confusion. "You're a great person Will. Fun, handsome, sweet, smart... well kinda," she added with a grin. "But I think it became obvious to Lisa that being a boyfriend is all you'd ever be." His face clouded over in anger at this, but she went on, "Lisa, I'm sure isn't looking for marriage at seventeen, but she knows she'll want more, *eventually*. And it's my conjecture that she believes *eventually* you'll tire of her and dump her."

"But I won't!"

"You say that, but your actions keep her at a safe distance. You love Lisa, I can tell. But you're not committed to your relationship. It's not enough to love her, you have to love the fact that you're in love. Right now, you love a girlfriend, but girlfriends will come and go, unless you commit to the relationship as well. You have to ask yourself if you even want that kind of relationship. There's no saying you have to."

Will didn't know the answer then, but over the next week, he came to realize that he did. Despite the waves of confusion that washed back and forth over him, he discovered he did want Lisa, not only in his life but in his future as well.

However, she would have nothing to do with him and in fact seemed to disappear off the island completely.

Every day he went by the Burger King, lurking about near the pinball machines, but not once did she show up for work. At night, he went to their bench by the seawall, strolling as casually as possible back and forth, feeling like a fool for doing it, but not being able to help it. Eventually he summoned the courage to go to her apartment, something Lisa had begged him never to do. He knocked on her door a couple of times, however there was never an answer.

He worried that she had gone to stay with her uncle, something her little brother did every summer to get away from their mom, but Talitha had a

grapevine of sorts through Brian, and knew Lisa was still on the island. He tried to get messages through to her but was rebuffed, and he became frightfully angry over this, but then almost immediately became despondent and apathetic.

His part-time job and the rigors of preparing for M-day helped keep him occupied somewhat, but they were stopgaps and even with them, he would still find himself suddenly in tears or punching a wall in anger. His mind seemed constantly on Lisa and the world became grey and indistinct at the edges, as if nothing else mattered. The actual move-in day was terrible since he had to pass by her place and their old haunts, time and again. Each trip brought fresh pain to him and he was glad in the late afternoon when all there was left to do was to move the countless boxes up the many, many stairs.

By the next day, his energy deserted him and still there was so much to be done. After endless hours of drudgery, he was desperate to go out and resume his search for Lisa, but was forced instead to go next door for dinner with the Harris family. This proved to be the most frightfully dull and annoying experience of his life, outside of school that is.

The day after that, June 4, started well but finished in a chaos that nearly ended forever any chance he had at getting Lisa back.

2

The priest was right on time for dinner, in fact Will wondered if he had been lurking outside waiting for his cue from the Jern's grandfather clock. Right after the first of its six chimes Father Alba knocked loudly and importantly on the front door.

Katie, who was excitedly expecting company zipped across the floor in front of Will to open it, but upon seeing the unassuming priest in his all black attire, choked back the memorized greeting she was about to give. Her pretty face became clouded by a combination of confusion and impatience; it was obvious to her that *this* was not the dinner guest.

"Yeah?" she asked absently as she danced to the left and then to the right searching for the real dinner guests. When she didn't see anyone else, she turned back to the priest. "Who are you?"

"This is our dinner guest, Katherine." Her father's voice held firm tones that caused Katie's ears to perk up. "And you need to answer the door properly and greet him as you have been taught." She turned to Commander Jern, who had been coming down the stairs and at the sight of her father's stern face, she broke out her most winning smile.

Turning back to the bemused priest, she dropped into a deep curtsy. She had practiced a formal greeting with Talitha for part of the afternoon and everyone in the house had been curtsied to, at least three times. She dipped her head demurely and the pink ribbon that kept her blonde ponytail in place drooped in front of her eyes. Her hands held the edges of the white sundress and her tan, skinny little girl legs crossed perfectly.

"I am...ah, a pleasure to welcome you into our home, uh Mister..."

The priest gave a low bow in return. "Father Alba."

"Father?" Still in her deep curtsy, her pretty face contorted in confusion, she pulled her head around to her own father. "Isn't your daddy in heaven... and this is definitely not Granpy." She gave the priest a suspicious look. "Are you jerking my chain?"

Commander Jern made a tired little noise, "Ugh." It was all Will could do not burst out laughing and he turned slightly away to hide his smile.

The priest straightened from his bow and he had a smile of his own, which he directed at the little girl. "No. No, I am not anyone's, ah, daddy. Father is my title."

A small dawning of understanding doused Katie's suspicions and she asked, "You mean your bigness?"

The priest looked confused and a little surprised at this question and subconsciously put his hand to his large stomach. "No, Katie," William said. "He doesn't have rank like a commander or a captain. What he has, is similar to the term principal, like Principal Flannery at your school."

"Oh," she said in deep thought but still in mid-curtsy. "It is a pleasure to welcome you into our new home... *Father* Albert."

She had just straightened from her curtsy, when the priest said kindly, "It's *Father Alba*."

She immediately dropped back down into the curtsy again. "*Father Alba*."

"Yes. Yes. Good." *Father Alba* smiled at Katie and patted her on the head almost shyly but then moved toward Will. "Will! Look at you. Look at you!" He reached out and shook Will's hand with great vigor. "I haven't seen you in church for a while, tsk. Although I did see your Miss Lisa, and she seemed fairly upset, yes fairly upset." A sad nod of his head, accompanied the second utterance of the phrase. Will tried to look calm but his intestines suddenly twisted themselves into knots. The priest continued, "I know things could be better for her at home. Please ask her to come by and see me, just to talk."

Will knew that he was the real problem with Lisa, but said, "I will, Father," in an almost inaudible voice.

"Good. Good. Commander Jern, it's so nice to see you." He then gave Will's father a manly and hardy handshake.

"Thank you for coming," the Commander said and then paused. Will wondered what the polite greeting was to someone who had invited himself to your house for dinner. His father went on, "I want to apologize for the way I ended our last conversation. I was abrupt and I should not have been."

"No worries, no worries," the priest responded. "The spaghetti smells great! But since it's not quite done, why don't I bless the house while we wait? Will, there's a large box on the porch. Can you please bring it in, but be careful! There's a pie in it."

Will went for the box, wondering how the priest knew that dinner would be another twenty minutes. He was equally puzzled at what a house blessing was. He'd never heard of one, but at the smell of the pie, his stomach rumbled loudly and he hoped it wouldn't take long.

"Thank you, Will. Please put it down just here, in the foyer." The priest reached into the large box and brought out a brightly polished silver brazier and a lighter. Lifting off the lid of the brazier, he lit what looked like brown sugar cubes, which began to smoke slightly. The aroma of the incense struck Will almost immediately.

It was sharp and interesting and he found himself sniffing lightly in a dog-like manner as his brain attempted to interpret the smell, to define or categorize it. "We will just let that cook for a few minutes." Father Alba set the brazier aside.

"That stinks!" Katie had been trying to get a look inside the box and now she pulled back holding her nose, "P.U.!"

"Maybe you should go into the kitchen if it bothers you," her father said.

Her curiosity was too great. "No, I'm ok. What's all this stuff for anyway?"

"I'm going to bless the house," the priest explained. "This is done when a family moves into a new home. I'll ask the Lord to watch over your home and all of you who live there."

"Oh." Katie's brow furrowed with deep concentration. "Who's this lord guy?"

Father Alba laughed loudly. "The Lord is God."

"Katie, Father Alba is a priest," William added.

Before Katie could ask her next obvious question, Father Alba looked down into her face. "A priest is someone who represents God and prays to God on behalf of the people of his church. Do you understand?"

"Sure," she said, not understanding at all. "What does prays mean?"

"Well now, praying is speaking to God." Father Alba seemed quite content answering Katie's questions and Will knew that unless stopped, she would ask questions all night. His stomach rumbled loudly again.

Katie appeared skeptical again. "You talk to dead people? Are you jerking my..." A quick guilty look to her father stopped the impertinent question.

The priest looked puzzled as people often did when speaking to Katie. "Katie, God is not dead."

"Yes he is. Daddy said so." The priest and William exchanged a quick look and William opened his mouth to say something, but his mouth just hung open like a broken screen door swaying slightly. Katie spoke for him, "He says Heaven is where dead people go when they die, and God is in Heaven."

She suddenly brightened. "Hey, do you also talk to dead animals?"

This question had never been put to the priest before, judging by the bemused and bewildered look on his face. Before he could even think to ask what Katie meant, she continued excitedly, "On-a-cuz, I had a goldfish that died and mommy said that Pumpkin... that was my goldfish's name... on-a-cuz he was fat and not gold at all, but really orange... and he died, and mommy said that he went to Heaven to be with God and Granpy Jern." She paused and her face was hopeful.

Catching on, Father Alba became thoughtful and sad. "I'm sorry but I don't speak Goldfish. Now, now we had better get on with this blessing before your brother's rumbling belly gets any louder."

He picked up the slightly smoking brazier by a long silver chain that hung from its top. This he handed to Will. "Just swing it gently to give it a nice airflow." He then reached into the box and brought out a crucifix. It was a foot long and the ornate figure of Jesus looked to be made of pewter. He gave it to Katie. "Now you can carry this without dropping it, right?" She nodded and eyed the person nailed to the cross with interest. Next, from the box, came a stylish silver bucket and surprisingly it was half filled with water. Lying in it was a long silver handled cylinder, which had a rounded end. "With your permission, Commander Jern."

William had the tiniest smile straining at the corner of his mouth, but said expressionlessly, "Please. By all means."

Father Alba made the Sign of the Cross and proclaimed loudly, "Peace be with this house and all who dwell here. Blessed be the name of the lord. Amen..." He turned to Will and Katie, "Please say amen."

"Amen," Will responded.

"Amen?"

Ignoring her question, the priest continued, "When Christ took flesh through the Blessed Virgin Mary, he made his home with us. Let us now pray that he will enter this home and bless it with his presence..."

Somewhere along the way, Talitha joined them in the blessing of the house. She stood well back and watched with the uncanny way she had. His sister claimed not to have a photographic memory, but Will was sure that she would later be able to recite every verse the priest had said as he went from room to room.

At the entrance to the basement, the priest hesitated just the slightest before going down and it was the only part of the house where he did a blessing in the hall as well as each of the rooms. Will noted that there seemed to be something going on between the priest and his dad. William eyed the man with that fantastic perception he shared with Talitha. The scrutiny encompassed every action and word, right down to nuance and pronunciation, but Will couldn't see what it was his father was looking for.

The priest for his part seemed nervous under that close stare and while in the boiler room glanced with great frequency over his shoulder at the door where William stood. But whatever was transpiring between the two men, ended when the blessing was completed and they climbed the stairs to eat.

Dinner with Father Alba was fun and easily the high point in the last nine days of Will's life. He was an interesting man and had stories seemingly from every country on the planet. He ate, laughed, and talked enough for two people. But as usual, it was Katie who had Will cracking up. Near the end of the meal, she had caught on that Father Alba tended to repeat little parts of his sentences. It was when they were just serving the apple pie the priest had brought with him, that Will first heard Katie.

"Now, who wants a big piece? A big piece?" Father Alba had inquired.

And right after, Will heard: "A big piece." Katie said it in a small voice. It was like a little echo and was almost not noticeable at first.

A minute later it was: "The villagers say they saw the lion. A lion!"

"A lion," came her little echo.

Will looked at her with a smile of utter disbelief and she gave him a smile right back. Hers held a naughty joy that only mischief could bring out.

The adults didn't seem to notice and Katie's echo got just a little louder each time. This continued for a while until their father spoke icily, "Katie, would you please clear the dishes away. Thank you." She got off lightly in Will's point of view, especially since she made such a show of tottering around under piles of dishes that it caused their mother to hop up to help.

The after dinner chitchat was mercifully short. Will had things to do, foremost of which was that he needed to look for Lisa.

He was fast becoming an addict.

It wasn't that he wanted to look for her—he had to. Therefore, after saying a quick good bye to Father Alba, Will headed out into the evening. As was usual, there was no sign of Lisa.

With a weary sigh, he strolled over to see his friend Carlos who was throwing one of his weekly parties. Will's best friend Doug Prouders had been trying to talk him into going to it for days, using encouraging words such as, "Stop being such a mopey pussy."

Will was actually looking forward to a bit of fun and distraction and after an hour at the party he was well on his way to getting drunk enough to temporarily forget about Lisa.

However, it was then that Lisa decided to show up. Will had spent the last year trying to get her to come to these parties. And now nine days and two hours after they broke up, there she was. He had been working on his fifth beer and was finally starting to relax, when Brian Galt walked in and gave Will a large grin and an equally large handshake.

"Brian, how're you doing buddy?" Will asked and looking about added, "Where's Tal?"

"She wanted to talk to you out back." Brian should have been quicker. He had just started to tug a slightly unbalanced Will to the back door when Lisa walked in with a man. Not a boy, but a man. He was as tall as Will and looked almost as strong and Will guessed his age at twenty-five. Moreover judging from the regulation haircut, he was likely a *Coastie*. Anger doused any happy buzz Will had been feeling, and he immediately started heading in their direction with a terrible fierceness in his eyes. He only made it three feet before Brian grabbed up his left arm and swung him around.

"Hey man! You don't..." Will shoved him hard and the smaller boy went over the back of a couch and landed amidst a collection of beers. His foot came down on the edge of a bowl of chips and they shot into the air, a brief golden brown fountain. Will paused only the briefest moment, looking at the sprawling boy covered in beer and potato chips, but his sudden jealousy could not be denied and he turned back to Lisa.

Carlos and Doug both came at him then, but Carlos got to him first.

He should have waited for Doug. Carlos was Filipino and small for a Filipino at that. He made Brian look big in comparison and might have weighed a scant hundred and ten pounds. Will saw them both coming from either side and as Carlos reached out for him, Will grabbed him first and threw him bodily at Doug. Carlos slammed face first into Doug's chin and an inch long gash immediately opened over Carlos' right eye.

The two boys went down in a heap.

Will turned toward Lisa and her man, the fierceness in his eyes matched by a wicked smile playing on his face. He had been fighting what he had called "melancholy madness" since the breakup. Waves of terrific anger at his ill treatment would wash over him, followed quickly by sadness would have him lying

on the floor of his room, crying. He felt trapped by his emotions and had longed for an end to the pain and anger.

This was the release he was looking for.

The pair had barely walked in the room and were standing in the doorway as Will made his way toward them. Will saw the *chivalrous*, bastard push Lisa behind him to shield her and the action drove Will into an almost uncontrollable rage.

Only ten feet and a chair were between Will and his enemy. The chair seemed weightless and flew aside like a toy, as Will's hands became rock hard fists. The Coastie looked prepared for him, but there was a slight apprehension in his stance and in his eyes. This made Will only want to hurt him more, but he had barely cleared half the distance before Talitha stepped in between him and his victim.

"Stop it Will, now!"

The wicked smile left his face abruptly, replaced by angry surprise. His hands opened and closed a couple of times and then he tried to dodge around her, but he was obvious and she was quick.

"Talitha, move!" he roared his demand.

"No."

He dodged to the other side, but it had been his only real option and she had long before seen it, so that again she was between the man and her brother. He stared over her head and his blood began to boil. "Move now or..."

"Or what?"

"Or... or..." he was at a loss.

Her calm was as powerful as his anger, but far easier to maintain. It would be impossible for him to hurt her and he wouldn't be able to get around her without doing just that. He stood in a terrific wrath for a few seconds and then abruptly the rage within him deflated.

He turned away, suddenly apathetic to everyone and everything. Walking back into the living room of the small house he surveyed the destruction he had caused. His melancholy returned like a dead stone in a chest and stooping, he picked up a beer, opened it, and drank it in a matter of seconds.

"Hey look, I don't want any trouble here," the Coastie said. Will's tremendous jealous wrath returned in an instant. He turned toward him, and if Talitha had not still been in the way, he would have crushed the man.

Talitha saw all of this and with her amazing calmness said to the Coastie, "I think for your own sake you should be quiet, you cradle-robbing-asshole." At this, the low murmuring of the surprised guests ended abruptly, the broken beer bottles stopped fizzing, and it even seemed as if the crickets in the nearby baseball fields ceased their incessant chirping.

Will's anger was doused again as suddenly as it had flamed up. In his entire life, he had never heard Talitha curse once. And not even close to once. She could keep her emotions in check with the perfection of a Zen master. Yet she had purposefully cursed. He stared hard at her, just as she had done to him countless times. He saw the love she felt for him and he saw that she was angry, not with him but with Lisa and finally he saw his own pain mirrored in her eyes.

The melancholy threatened to sink him again and what she said next caused tears to spring into his eyes. "Would you like to have a beer with me?" Talitha

walked over to him and turned him away from Lisa and the Coastie. "What kind of beer tastes the best? I've only had sips of dad's and it's always repellant."

Will was blinking back his tears when Brian, Carlos, and Doug walked over to the brother and sister. Carlos had a blood soaked rag pressed to the right side of his face. "What the hell, Willy J! Look what you did to me! Look what you did to my dad's place." Will was at a loss for words, so he looked to the ultimate source for words.

Talitha stepped forward unbidden by her brother and peered into Carlos' battered face. He glared back angrily. "That scar is going to be a rugged one," she said. "It already makes you look much manlier."

His face went from angry to hopeful in a second. "Really?" Was all he said before he ran to the bathroom mirror to check for signs of manliness.

"Don't sweat how the place looks Willy J, it would have looked liked this by the end of the night anyway," Doug said. "Hey Talitha? How's my manliness quotient?" He showed her his bruised chin.

"Well Doug, as you know, in mathematics, a quotient is the result of division. So if we divide your looks, deficient as they are, by your substandard penis length, the quotient, on a scale, termed for your understanding, would place you slightly above geek, but well below nerd."

Doug stared at her for a few moments, then turned to Brian, slapped him on the back and muttered, "Have fun with that one." He then walked away.

Watching Doug get put in his place by Talitha was usually hilarious to Will, but he felt hollow and stared about him with unseeing eyes. There was a great dark cloud hovering over his mind and he was having trouble catching up with the conversation around him. The word repellant that Talitha had used just came to him suddenly and he chuckled weakly.

"Talitha at a party, in the middle of a fight, drinking, cursing... what's next? You gonna start smoking?"

"About the party: we were told to anticipate fireworks by none other than Amy Harris." Talitha replied. "I'm expecting her to show up within the next fifteen minutes. She is the most obvious... gross!" She had taken a drink of her Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Her pretty face contorted and she gave her head a violent shake. "How can you drink this stuff?" she asked Brian who was taking a long pull from his can.

"It's a combination of maturity and acquired tastes," Brian answered calmly and patiently.

Talitha's eyes widened at this and she took in a large breath to begin her rebuttal. But she paused looking at Brian, and Will saw that he had been just a little too casual.

The two loved to play the game of who was smarter than *whom*. Brian had been hoping that Talitha would respond too quickly to the word maturity, since there was little evidence of maturity in the fourteen or so beer drinkers in the room.

The empty feeling had not left Will so he grabbed up another beer, drank deeply, and sighed heavily. Talitha gave him a quick commiserating smile but then turned back to her challenger.

She stared at Brian intensely, rubbing her chin gently as if she was stroking a beard. "First off, mine was a rhetorical question but, since you chose to answer a

question that didn't need a reply, we will discuss the topic. Be warned however that from now on I will have to tell you when I'm asking a rhetorical question since you get so easily confused."

"If that'll make you feel better about yourself, please feel free," Brian retorted and gave Will a knowing smile, but Will did not know. He was feeling slow and stupid and wanted to drink.

"Obviously you are referring to the physical and not to either the emotional or the intellectual, when you mentioned the word maturity." Brian nodded and Talitha went on, "Taste buds do change over time so it's not inconceivable that one day I will be found sipping," she consulted the can, "Pabst and gorging myself on a plate of brussel sprouts. It's the term 'acquired tastes' that has me most perplexed."

Talitha looked long at Brian. "The term itself suggests the necessity of prolonged exposure to a substance one would initially find naturally abhorrent. I can easily imagine the rest of these future alcoholics." She waved her hand to indicate the teenagers around them. "Forcing themselves to drink and to smoke due to social pressures, but you would never do that." He smiled agreeably at her reasoning. "Soooo... you acquired the taste... at the outset, how? Hmm... by linking the drink with another food item!" She said this in a rush as she was thinking it. "Pizza! A few months ago, you mentioned you only like red peppers on your pizza every once in a while, but by my recollection you like them only when you have a beer to go with your pizza." She smiled triumphantly. "You began acquiring your taste for beer by drinking it with pizza. Your father enjoys the combination as well, and I surmise this was where you were originally acquainted with the pairing."

"Yes, right down to the red peppers." He gave her a mock bow, then stepped forward and kissed her.

Will didn't realize it at first, but he had enjoyed their little nerd courting ritual. They both truly seemed to love each other and watching them he felt the dark cloud over his mind weaken. It came back, but less strong when they started to kiss. He glanced away then and saw Lisa by herself. She had never looked more beautiful.

She'd gone all out.

Her hair was curled and teased, so that it resembled a flowing blonde mane. Her makeup appeared as if an artist had worked on her, making her green eyes fairly blaze out of her face. She wore a very short, tight mini skirt and the muscles of her inner thighs were clearly visible, making Will long for her badly.

She stood next to the ice chest, holding a can of beer in one hand and rooting around in the cooler with the other. Without thinking, Will stood up, and had taken two steps toward her when he came to his senses. He stood there watching her. Lisa looked up a minute later, their eyes locked, and the connection that had been with them for the last year was still there. He thought nothing, but felt everything. His heart began to hurt, his chest constricted and it was only when his tears started to fall off his chin that she looked away, confused.

A second later Lisa turned back to him and anger burned in her eyes. She marched over to him then and now up close, he could see she was fighting back tears of her own. "No! You had your chance," she hissed at him. She wiped the back of her hands against her eyes. They were a bright green and he wanted to

kiss the tears away. "You were right last week. You're like a kid. You're like a kid who only wants what he can't have."

"Lisa, wait I do lo..."

"No! No! Don't say it! Stop trying to talk yourself into loving me. I don't want your pity. I'm going to be selfish from now on, you hear me?" She poked him angrily in the chest with her tiny finger. "I thought I could love you forever, even with the knowledge that you didn't truly love me. I thought if I was unselfish and gave and gave, it would be enough for me just to have you near. But it wasn't! I'm the bad guy here! I wanted more. I wanted to be able to trust you."

"Lisa! God damn it!" Will roared and grabbed both of her arms. He towered over her in his rage, but like Talitha, she knew he would never hurt her. "I have done nothing for you to doubt me; I never cheated on you a single time. I have been devoted only to you."

"That's not the kind of trust I'm talking about." She cast her face down and her tears were huge and heavy. They splashed as they hit the cracked linoleum of the kitchen floor. "I told you all of this last week. You're cheating me, not cheating on me. You're not giving me all you have." She looked up but not at him. Her wonderful green eyes were unfocussed and far away. "I don't think I can love a man who doesn't love me," she said to herself.

Will was on the verge of expressing his love to her when the Coastie entered the room and stood in the doorway. He had a sneering contemptuous look on his face and anything Will was going to say that might have saved his relationship, drowned in the blackness of his jealous anger. His body went stiff as his muscles tightened.

"Will, listen to me," Lisa said, and her maturity focused him. "Forget about him. I was wrong to bring him here; I was just trying to make you jealous." She shook her head as if to clear it. "That was a mistake, but it doesn't change the fact that you still don't love me. You're an open book; I see the anger and the jealousy and the sadness, but not the love. You have always held back, waiting to see if something better might be coming along... well here's your chance, go find it. I won't stop you."

4

Lisa turned and walked out of the house followed by the Coastie. A silence engulfed Will. It extended past the staring of the other teenagers and went deep within him. He felt as though he was submerged beneath a lake. His vision doubled and then tripled and everything around him went out of focus.

Talitha hugged him and told him that it would be ok and Brian, still with potato chips encrusted to his shirt, handed him a beer. They talked to him, and around him as he drained the beer. Another one was pressed into his hands and still he heard nothing but echoes and saw nothing that was real.

Timing is everything in life.

If Amy Harris had shown up while Will had been in his fugue state, his night would have ended in a much different manner. But she arrived a few minutes after Doug came over with more beer. Doug sauntered up and giving Talitha a wide

birth as if she were a dog on a chain, gave Will another drink. "Alright widdle baby, time to take your medicine," he said jovially.

"Alcohol is actually a poison," Brian said and then guzzled from his can.

"I think laughter might be the best medicine for Will," Talitha added. After the confrontation, she had started sipping at her beer and had just finished her first.

"It would be, if there was anything to laugh at!" Doug exclaimed in a loud voice. "Could you believe that Coastie hitting on teenagers? Does anyone know who that asshole was?"

"I think he works over at the firehouse," Brenda Dillers chimed in. "He's always trying to flirt with all the girls, even my fourteen-year-old sister!"

"Holy crap!" Doug became even louder and grabbing Will, he gave him a great shake. "You know what...you know what? We're gonna report his stupid ass!"

"Somebody call Skipper!" a voice yelled out and the room exploded in laughter.

"No I'm serious, the guy is a pervert." Doug did seem quite upset despite his drunkenness.

Anger started to work its way out of the black cloud of Will's mind. It was a low simmering anger and the focus shifted constantly from Lisa, to the Coastie and then to himself.

It was then that Amy came in.

He would find out later about the lack of underwear but the fact that she was braless was immediately apparent to everyone, drunk or not. She wore a white T-shirt and a short flowing skirt. Her breasts swayed rhythmically back and forth, as she strutted up to him. Amy ignored the people around Will and knelt down next to him, placing her large breasts on his arm. She leaned into him.

"I just heard about Lisa bringing that Coast Guardsmen here tonight, are you ok?"

Will was very nearly drunk at this point and Amy might not have had a face as far as he was concerned. He had stared at her breasts as they made their way slowly up to him and when they heavily, and very warmly, settled themselves on his arm, he breathed a huge sigh. The nipples were engorged and pushed hard at the thin fabric. Will felt himself swell greatly and realizing his sister was there, he shifted in his chair and looked at Amy's face. She was smiling knowingly and did not mind his stares in the least.

"I guess so," he allowed.

"Do you think we can go somewhere and talk privately?" She didn't wait for a reply, but took hold of his hand and pulled. As he heaved himself up, the room spun around a couple of times and he tripped over Brian's foot and went crashing down.

"I see some of you boys have been starting your fun early tonight." Amy went to him but Talitha beat her to Will's side.

"I'll take care of him, Amy."

"Oh, ok. You don't mind if I talk to Brandon then." She was referring to Brian, who had reached his limit four beers earlier and was currently staring at Amy's breasts, as a starving man would look at a steak.

Amy walked over to him and put her hand on his arm. His eyes and his head bobbed in unison as he looked her up and down. Talitha finished helping Will to his feet and then went to Brian just as Amy crossed over to Will.

"I'll take good care of him. I'll make sure he gets home safely... I do know where he lives after all," Amy said, with a pleasant smile.

"It's ok, Tal." Will stood swaying back and forth. "I think I'm done drinking tonight anyway and I could use some fresh air. But first!" he said importantly. "I need to take a leak."

The trip upstairs made him realize just how drunk he was. After he urinated for what seemed ages, he went to the mirror and splashed cold water on his face until the room stopped spinning around him.

"There you are!" Amy purred, as he stepped out of the bathroom. She had a very bright smile for him. He tried to concentrate on that and purposely did not look at her breasts. "Come in here." Amy spun him away from the stairs and into a darkened bedroom.

He tried to push around her but ended up in her arms instead. Her face was an inch from his and with great gentleness she reached up and started to kiss him. He wanted to resist her but a part of him had other ideas and it pushed out as if spring-loaded. Embarrassed, he attempted to pull his hips back but Amy thrust herself against him and he found himself kissing her back, aggressively. Will brought her to the bed and without caring whose it was, lowered her down on it. As they kissed his hands went to her breasts and she moaned softly as he caressed them. He was rock hard now and her hands went to him.

Something wasn't right. Pulling away from the kiss with a moan of his own he looked down at the girl and saw... Amy.

Sudden crazy guilt poured over him. "Amy, I... ah... ah... ah," he was having trouble forming words, partly due to the alcohol coursing through his veins and partly because she had not relinquished her hold on him, but was kneading him expertly. "I can't," he said. Guilt swelled in him but his body wasn't listening and his muscles shuddered uncontrollably down his back.

"You can. She threw you away like a piece of garbage. You can do *whatever* you want." Her smile and her eyes and her hands made it nearly impossible to stop, but he had to and he reached down to take her hand off of him. Amy allowed this, but took his hand and placed it on her own thigh. She held his wrist and gently pulled his hand up her leg slowly, slipping it along her warm thigh. The higher his hand went, the warmer her leg felt under his touch.

He had expected panties but his fingers met no resistance and slipped into her. The heavy cloud of guilt which surrounded him faded to wisps that were blown away by her urgent moans. Any illusion he had of being able to stop himself evaporated with them and his only conscious feeling was a powerful, demanding desire.

5

Three hours later the heavy guilt—laced with panic—still kept him from breathing normally.

When he left Amy he had been tripping over things and knocking into people. It wasn't only all the beer he had consumed that caused this, it was also the realization of what he had just done. If Lisa found out, and she would, there could

be no chance at getting her back. It was this realization that had him in a frenzy to get away from Amy.

He felt a burning shame at his actions and didn't want anyone to see him. Amy was drop dead gorgeous and the very epitome of sexuality yet at the same time she was strangely repulsive and cruel. Will felt terrific guilt about cheating on Lisa, but he also was ashamed of himself.

He shook his head in disgust and the night spun briefly so he put his hand out to the building next to him for support. In the dark, the white building wasn't familiar to him, but walking to the front of it, he realized it was the little Catholic Church.

Will went up to the glass and peeked in just as his father had done the day before. Trying the doors and finding them locked, he sat down on the three short steps to pray. He always felt self-conscious when he prayed simply because he was a little fuzzy on the details surrounding the concept.

His prayers generally revolved around thanking God for the things he had been blessed with already and asking for guidance with the issues that he faced. He'd prayed a lot in the last week.

Will frequently wondered if he was even doing it right and there was no one at home he felt he could turn to on the subject. His parents never went to church or prayed as far as Will knew and he got the feeling that Talitha, with all of her science, didn't believe in God at all.

He had only been to the two churches on the island a handful of times and when he had glanced through the Bibles in the pews, he had been unable to find the chapter on prayers. Lisa had pointed out to him the Lord's Prayer but he didn't really care for it despite its simplicity. It seemed to make demands on God. '*Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins...*' This did not sit too well with him; it glided up to the edge of his vague notion of blasphemy.

His favorite prayer said during the church services was the one repeated right before Communion. *Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.* To Will this was what religion was all about. Admitting that he was flawed and sinful, yet knowing that with a single word from God he could be healed or made perfect.

Other than that little tidbit, his perception of Christianity was hazy at best. He wasn't even sure about the relationship between Jesus and God. He had thought that Jesus was the son of God, but the more he attended church the more he got the idea that Jesus was God.

When he had asked Lisa about this, she wasn't clear on the details either. All her life, she had felt a great emptiness inside her—principally because of her mom—and had wanted to find out if turning to God would help fill it.

Initially, she had gone by herself thinking religion was something personal, but after two solo attempts, she had asked Will to come along. She had felt lost during the services and painfully lonely. It seemed that everyone around her sat, either in pairs or in families and she felt distinctly isolated.

Will had never thought about going to church before but wanted to make her happy, so he put on his best suit and went along. Lisa would hold his hand tightly as they sat in the pews and he rarely felt closer to her than at church. While there, he felt he was her family, her only family.

Now in the dark, sitting on the steps of the church he tried to pray, but found it impossible. His mind was a confusion and the beginnings of a thumping hangover didn't help. The binary stars of his emotions: sadness and madness, had been whirling around each other for the last nine days but now they had a new playmate, probably a permanent one... guilt

His guilt had not abated a whit, but in fact grew every time he recalled the feel of Amy's hands on him, and his hands on her. This memory kept interrupting his feeble attempts at praying and he had to give up the effort.

He got up, staggered a moment and then peered into the glass-encased bulletin board and the name "Father Alba" caught his attention.

"What did Katie say?" he asked the glass. He felt sleepy and a little sick, but a smile came to his lips when the memory finally pushed its way to the front of his brain. "Are you jerking my chain?" What a thing to say to a priest! He loved Katie, partially because the little girl was always good for a laugh, something he had been in a deep need of recently.

His smile inverted itself when he next thought of Talitha. Shame made a brief appearance on stage, pushing aside his other pathetic emotions. How was he going to look her in the face tomorrow morning? She probably wouldn't say anything either; she would just give him that look of disappointment. He sighed long and heavily; his headache thumped harder.

The night began to grow cooler—he felt slightly refreshed by it—and thought he could make it home without waking everyone up. Starting back up the Row, his shame was pushed aside by exhaustion and a whiny self-pity. He wondered why Talitha hadn't been there for him. She certainly could have stopped Amy from going upstairs.

"But then what?" he asked the night. No answer came; the night was quiet and dark, and he felt invisible, which had a great appeal to him. It seemed like he had been under the spotlight of a thousand eyes everywhere he had gone in the last week. He had heard the whispers, had seen the stares, and had tried his best to ignore them. But under the shadow of the trees, there was nothingness and he felt he could think clearly. Talitha wasn't to blame. Even if she had kept Amy from coming up the stairs, what then? Would she have had to babysit him all night?

A sudden agonizing thought occurred to him... she just might have.

Next to one of the great oaks, he stopped in the shadows and stared at the ground. He painfully realized he was overly reliant on Talitha. To him, her word was law even more so than that of his parent's. Her advice was so accurate that it carried the weight of gospel in his mind.

In school any class that he didn't share with her, he aced easily. The ones they were in together, however, were a struggle and he now concluded it was because he never had to study and instead daydreamed his way through them. He had the certain knowledge that Talitha would bail him out of any situation.

Will started walking up the row again as self-disgust crept over him.

Was this why he had treated Lisa the way he did? Had he been waiting for his little sister to tell him how to behave in a relationship? She had certainly told him how to dress, what gifts to buy, and where to go on dates, and more—a lot more. Of course, the truth was she'd never told him to do anything, but a suggestion

from her was equal to the same thing. His self-disgust edged toward self-loathing. Was he waiting for her to tell him he needed to be a man?

He decided he was done. He was the big brother; from now on he'd look out for her. "From now on," he said quietly but fiercely to himself.

"From now on what?" A woman's voice spoke softly from the shadow of the tree closest to Will's house. He jumped back startled and felt a wave of adrenaline shoot through his body. Peering into the shadow, he at first thought it was Amy, and his stomach rolled queasily.

However, as the woman approached and the moonlight struck her, he saw that it was Mrs. Harris. She wore little more than a short silk kimono and held a large wine glass in her hand. The contents of the glass looked dark and thick.

The sight of her brought back the guilt; now it was tinged with embarrassment and worry. Thoughts raced through his mind. Did she know what happened tonight between her daughter and him? Had she been waiting out here to tell him off and then go spill everything to his parents? What would his mom say?

"Uh, it was nothing. I was just talking to myself, is all."

"That's not a good sign, you know. Talking to yourself at night, in the dark like this." She moved closer to him, and she was slightly unsteady on her feet. Will was shocked to see that her small kimono had not been tied very tightly and that most of her breasts peeked out at the moonlight. She seemed not to care.

"You're out late, aren't you? Out having a good time?" she asked quietly.

Had it been another time she might have turned him on, but he had only just told himself to start acting like a man and the only feeling he had for Mrs. Harris was embarrassment for her.

"No, I was taking a walk." He refused to look at her exposed breasts and instead looked up at the Moon. "It being such a nice night."

She turned to look up at the moon too. "Yeah it's great," she said it flatly without emotion. Will looked over at her then and she was staring off, literally into space. Her eyes were far away and her face expressionless. Her kimono had opened slightly wider and one of her large brown nipples was peeking out at the moonlight. The glass in her hand was all but forgotten and she held it without concern. The red wine, looking black as the night, dripped onto the bricks of the sidewalk. The resemblance to blood was disconcerting.

"Yeah, but for how long? Two more nights?"

What she was saying was lost on him. "Two more nights?"

Her body gave a tremendous shudder and her kimono opened further, but this time she seemed to realize how uncovered she was and pulled the fabric tight across her breasts.

"Yes, till the moon is full."

He glanced up at the mostly-formed orb. The moon bothered him. He felt as though it was spying on him and knew all that he had done. This time it was Will who shuddered and goose bumps broke out down his arms.

"I have to get going now. Have a nice night."

"Yes, you too," she paused and it seemed as if she wanted to say something else. Will looked at her and was just about to turn away when she spoke, "Talitha, your sister. Do me a favor and look out for her, will you?"

"Of course." Will stared at Mrs. Harris. How did she know that he had been just thinking that?

"I mean she has such a good reputation, being so virtuous. I wish my Amy was that way." The goose bumps reformed themselves on his arms. Did she know then, about tonight, he wondered. Mrs. Harris continued, with a small sigh, "She's a slut, a tramp and everyone knows it. But Talitha. You need to keep Talitha whole and unspoiled. Can you do that? Protect Talitha's reputation before she throws away her greatest gift. Very few girls look back on losing their virginity and say, 'that was a perfect moment.' Mostly it's rushed and sloppy and quickly regretted and once it's gone, there's no getting it back."

Will was almost speechless. "Yeah sure. I will. Umm, good night." He didn't know what to say. Getting advice on virtue from the mother of the biggest slut he knew felt extremely weird. He turned away as she nodded and waved her hand to him in a dismissive gesture.

Slipping around the back of the house, Will entered through the kitchen as quietly as possible, hoping to God that everyone was asleep, especially Talitha. The house was cool and dark and other than the distant sound of the boiler roaring away in the basement, it was quiet and still.

The boiler had been going nonstop for the last day since the repairman had been in, yet the house had never really heated up. It was much better than it had been, but it seemed barely to get above cool. The rooms along the back stairs were the worst and Talitha was trying to figure out why. Her current theory was that the house was situated over an underground cavern that was acting as a natural evaporative cooler. The only odd part of that to Will was she had yet to ask permission to begin to dig through the basement.

Standing in the darkened kitchen, he had a difficult choice to make. He could go up the back stairs and run the risk of waking Talitha up, and letting her get her, 'Oh so disappointed' looks in early, or go up the great stairs and try to slip past his father, who was a notoriously light sleeper and who would smell the alcohol on his breath in an instant. He had such shame that he nearly went the way of the great stairs, but instead moved up the back ones as noiselessly as possible. The stairs creaked softly under his weight, but no one stirred. In a minute, he was in bed and by the next minute, he was deeply asleep.

Will swam slowly into consciousness. It was bright out and the light made his eyes smart. He felt fine for a second and a half but then his hangover began a thunderous parade throughout his skull. He groaned softly and blinked, wondering what had woken him.

"Will! It's time to get up," his father bellowed from the second stair landing. That bellow seemed familiar, as if it had been part of the dream he was just having. Will wondered how long his father had been yelling for him. "I need to see you before I go to work!"

"I'm up!" That hurt. His head thumped hugely with each syllable.

Staggering to his feet, he went into the bathroom and squeezed as much toothpaste as he could stand into his mouth. Hurrying down the stairs, he stopped as far from his father as he could without being disrespectful. Will worried that he still smelled like beer and his father's intense gaze didn't help.

William was very much the Commander at the moment. He stood tall in his Dress White uniform—complete with sword. Everything about him was sharp and crisp, and his medals shone brightly against the white of his coat. He was looking at Will with the same perception that Talitha used, except he held an authority behind it that lent it power. It was all Will could do, not to wilt under that gaze and confess his many sins.

The Commander's eyes narrowed as he took in Will's haggard appearance, but then he looked away briefly and smiling said, "I have some chores for you to do, if you are up to it."

"Yes, I'm up for it," Will lied "Do you have another inspection?"

"Oh yes. The Admiral sure does love to play dress up." He shook his head. "If it wasn't for the sword I would look like a highly decorated waiter." This was untrue. He was a dashing figure in his uniform and Will thought he looked heroic. "I put a list for you on the table...but they don't all have to be done today."

"I'll get to them. I promise."

The Commander left through the front door and Will went into the kitchen to face the music. Talitha was just putting her breakfast dishes in the sink when he walked in.

"Wow! Did dad see you like that?" She eyed him in disbelief. Will looked down at himself.

"Oh boy!" His shirt was inside out, his fly wasn't just open but looked to be yawning hugely, and his jeans were sticky and stained with what looked like jelly. Will sat down and put his head in his hands. He hadn't seen what he was expecting to see in Talitha's eyes, not yet, but he felt it coming. With a sigh, he looked up at his sister. Leaning against the sink, she was studying him but without reproach. She smiled a small commiserating smile at him, but he could see she had much to say. There was a long silence as the two siblings looked at each other.

Finally Talitha broke it, "So are the rumors true?"

"Rumors already! What rumors?"

"You are going to play it coyly, then. I'm referring to the rumor that you..." Talitha paused and looked through the open dining room door. She continued, but in hushed tones, "That you uh, had, uh, sexual intercourse with Amy."

Talitha looked very much out of her element with this conversation. "Would you believe me if I said no?" he asked.

She looked long at him before answering with a nod, "I might, but no one else would, not with Amy Harris crowing to the world how you..." She stopped and her cheeks turned pink.

"I don't want to know," he sighed and looked out of the window. The golf course looked green and inviting. He wanted to lie in the grass and go back to sleep. "And it doesn't matter now anyway. Let her say what she will. Lisa will never have me back after last night so the truth hardly matters."

"What is the truth?" Talitha had him focused with her high-powered perception, he felt like a bug under a microscope.

He thought for a moment before answering, "The truth is, I don't kiss and tell."

"Since when?"

"Since last night. I'm sorry to be abrupt, but I've got this list dad left for me." He was tired and even though the hangover had abated somewhat, he still felt sick. "Can I give you one piece of advice? Make Brian work hard for it. Demand that he make it perfect for you, and then..."

She was shocked at what he had said but also intensely curious. "And then what?"

He smiled and tapped her on the head. "Turn off your brain, don't try to analyze the situation, just enjoy it."

She blushed furiously. He had just walked past her to get started on the list, when she said, "Yes. Ok I will. It's like the Heisenberg principle, or as some refer to it as the Uncertainty Principle..."

"Talitha! My head can't take it this morning." He looked at her tiredly, his face drooping, "And it sounds like you may need to practice at turning off your brain, so go do that." She smiled at him and the blush in her cheeks made her prettier still.

6

Moving slowly to his bathroom to get ready for what he felt was going to be a long painful day, Will couldn't stop sighing. His first chore wasn't on the list but was very necessary. Gathering his courage, he went next door to talk to Amy. He felt the need to apologize for the way he had left her at the party and he wanted to ask her to stop spreading rumors, but no one answered the door. It wasn't much of a relief and he went back home and performed all of the chores in a listless manner, as if his arms and legs were weighted down.

Later, when he had completed his labors, he suppressed a great desire to hide in his room, and instead went out. He made his usual rounds. For the previous ten days, he had gone to every teen hangout on the island hoping to find Lisa. Will hadn't seen her a single time and this was no different.

Many of his friends wanted to talk with him but he wasn't in the mood and politely begged off. He wandered about and in desperation even went to the fire station and walked boldly in. However neither she nor the Coastie from the night before were there. Finally he went to their bench and watched the sunset alone and lonely. He tried to think about what he would say to her when he eventually found her, but nothing came to mind that would excuse his behavior.

Will pictured his end of the conversation: "I love you forever, but I just fooled around with this big slut, I hope you don't mind."

How do you say that but in such a way that Lisa would accept.

Impossible.

Still, he had to try. He knew only one thing for certain and that was he would be a man about it. No more running to his sister for advice or making pathetic excuses at his behavior. He had a man as a role model and he would do his best to live up to that standard.

A sound from behind him made him turn hopefully but it was another couple out for a stroll. They were young, perhaps mid-twenties and still in love, holding hands and whispering to each other with smiles in their voices. Enviously, he

watched them but then noticed the moon peeking out from the Brooklyn skyline. The curve of it crested, barely visible behind the buildings across the river and the spying sensation from the night before came back to him. It was time to go home.

His family had already eaten dinner but there was no admonishment, only a warm hug from his mother. Exhausted and melancholy, he excused himself and went to bed.

When he woke the next morning his mood had improved slightly, but the morning got even better when he found out his mom had made French toast. It tasted better than the last time she had made it and he felt the dark cloud in his mind lift. He knew his mom had made the breakfast simply to make him happy and everyone was being especially cheerful. Even his father, who told a funny story that happened the day before. The admiral it seemed had done the entire inspection with his fly open and had been pleasantly surprised at how upbeat and happy all the men were.

The family laughed at the story and Katie immediately unzipped the fly on her pink jeans and started strutting around the table. Puffing out her tiny chest, she looked every one up and down.

"Those boat-cutters are too white! I want them painted orange and do it in a hurry," she demanded in her deepest voice, sounding more like Santa Claus than any admiral. They enjoyed her antics and she spent the rest of the morning with her fly open, striking poses to best show it off. Will felt happy for a change and wished in a good way that Lisa were there so she could laugh along with them.

The day was a relaxing one and Will refrained from going on his daily 'Lisa hunt.' He figured if it was meant to be, it would happen. However he did go to their bench at sunset. He watched the sun go down and felt at peace with himself for the first time in a long while.

The sun was a beautiful golden arc just above the horizon when Lisa came and stood next to the bench.

She was a wreck.

Her hair looked wild and tangled and she had long black streaks of old mascara running down both cheeks. Her clothes were filthy and ripped and she more resembled a bag lady, than the gorgeous girl from two nights before.

Her face was pinched in anger or resolution, but her eyes were still the magic green that he loved.

Nothing could change that. The last golden rays of the sun lit them up and he looked past any imperfections and saw only a beautiful girl. She spoke to him and her tone was harsh, angry, and full of self-pity; he missed that voice. No one else knew this about her, but she had a wonderful singing voice. It had been months into their relationship before she sang for him and he realized that he missed the sound of her voice, angry or not.

Her mouth moved and formed words with perfect lips. Her tongue would slip out frequently and lick them and he remembered their exquisite softness. She had a light spray of freckles on each cheek. She had hated these with the same passion that he had always loved them and in her excitement and the light of the setting sun, they stood out obviously and he knew that they would embarrass her, if she knew. He breathed her in with a great heavy sigh and listened for a long while without speaking.

"So there is a winner after all. Have you come to shake my hand, to tell me nice try? Is that why you're here?" Lisa turned away, looked at the fading light, and clutched herself as if she were cold.

"Are you here to gloat? To make me feel small?" Turning from the last of the sun, she continued, "Well you can. I can't stop you. The Gods threw the dice and you came up the winner, didn't you? The judges decided and that's that, isn't it?"

She walked away from him then and strolled almost casually to the seawall thirty feet away. The sun had gone down and she was now just a silhouette against the rapidly darkening sky.

Will didn't move, he was afraid to. He felt that if he went to her now she would only run.

"But tell me," she called out softly from the new darkness. "Does she kiss like me? Does it..." her voice broke. "Does it feel the same?" He could hear her crying softly and shame made him cast his eyes down. "I'm sorry if this makes you feel bad, seeing me this way. I didn't..." She stopped speaking and her breath hitched in her chest like a little spasm.

Behind her, the waves gently broke against the seawall, but other than that, there was a silence around them. He could say nothing. It was almost as if he had been struck dumb. Moments later, when he looked back up, she stood over him. Will hadn't heard her at all. Like an apparition she had just appeared in front of him.

"When it was me in your arms," she said. "I thought I belonged there. Everything made sense as long as I pretended that you loved me. But you were only a spectator at a show, and it was only a matter of time before you... got up and left." Lisa seemed to be going back and forth between anger and resignation.

"I... I tried. I played all my cards but one, and now... and now... and now there's no ace left to play, is there?" She hauled her hand back and slapped him hard across the face. He had seen the blow coming but let it fall anyway and hoped she would hit him again, but she didn't.

Instead, she screamed into his face, "Is there! I was so stupid, playing by the rules!" She then unexpectedly straddled him as she had done countless times before, sitting on his lap her small hands upon his cheeks. The moon was out for the show and it looked huge, round, and cold as winter. The light from it struck her face and her eyes lost their green. The dead pale glow blurred her freckles and her lips became colorless.

Even though he kept his head up and they were almost nose to nose, she whispered, "Look at me." She searched his face as if looking for a sign. "But all that is history, because you won. You're the big winner, you understand? You get it all. I can't stop you. Take everything from me. Take my virginity it's yours. Take my life, beat me, do what you want to me. I... I... will take whatever you'll give me." She laughed hard and cruelly and her tears rained down on him. "You can sleep around, screw whoever you want, and I will still love you. I will always love you. Love doesn't have to be a two way street... but... but you have to give me something! Even if it is the smallest part of your heart. Please! Please!"

Pulling herself off of him, she threw herself on her knees and sobbed horribly, "Please, please, please!" Lisa gripped his legs fiercely as she cried and her nails dug into his skin but he didn't care.

He was still unable to form any words, but he could hold her. With his long muscular arms, he reached down and gently picked her up as if she was a child and pressed her delicate, warm face to his. He had been crying noiselessly this whole time and he let his tears mix with hers. Her lips felt puffy and wonderfully soft. With tenderness, he kissed her until she responded and their kiss became wet and passionate.

Quickly, he became aroused but he didn't want her to know, so he cradled her high to his chest. They kissed long and deeply, but eventually even his strong arms grew tired and he set her down on the bench and knelt in front of her as she had him. He felt he had to say something but had no idea what, so he let the words come as they would.

"I was wrong. I was wrong about many things." The words started slow, hesitantly, but soon began to pour out of him, "I wanted to stay a kid. That was my problem. I didn't want to grow up. I wanted to have my fun, but I didn't want to be responsible. For you or your feelings.

"I thought we could say, I love you, back and forth and have it not mean anything. I was such a coward! You see, if *you* really loved me that meant I was responsible for your happiness, your sadness, perhaps even for your whole life. And that scared me, I hid myself from it." He looked around at the dark amazed, wondering where all of this came from.

"So you never loved me," she asked without any strength in her voice.

He laughed in self-disgust. "No, I do love you and always have. That's the worst part. I was allowed to love you with all my heart, but you couldn't love me back. Do you know why? Do you? Because if I was the only one in love, then only I could get hurt. I could deal with that. But I couldn't deal with having it in my power to hurt you. Look what I've done to you. As much as I was sad and angry since we broke up, it hurts me ten times as much to see you in this much pain. Each one of your tears is my fault! Each tear is because of me and they stab me in the heart! That's what I'm talking about. As long as you never truly loved me, you could never feel this much pain. So I hid my love..."

He looked away shaking his head at the moon. "I held back. I wanted you not to love me as much as you did. I know now that I was sabotaging our relationship. I never wanted it to end, I just never wanted it to go forward. I wanted it to stay frozen in time, unchanging and perfect. But I never considered what you wanted..."

Will stopped and shook his head, angry with himself. "I'm lying again! Damn it! I knew what you wanted. I knew exactly what you wanted, but I was afraid of it. How can you love such a coward? You were right to break up with me. I was living in a childish fantasy. I was in Never Never Land, where I would never have to grow up."

He held her hands and looked her in the eyes. "But I want it all now. I'm being childish again—I want all of you. Please take me back. You should not be begging me, I'm not worth it. I should be begging you, and I am. Please take me back, please. I'll be strong and courageous, like you. I want this love. I want you. I want us. Tell me what I..." He stopped in disbelief. He was about to ask her what to do and how to behave. "I'll show you my love every day. I'll put you above me always."

Her face held a mixture of desperate hope and tremendous weariness. "I wish I could believe you. I want to believe you. If I take you back, don't ever hurt me please, just kill me. I can't take any more pain." Her words hurt badly. They were a razor across his heart, but he had to hurt her more now.

With one more glance into the dark, he took a deep breath. "Two nights ago, after the party I... I... I fooled around with Amy Harris. It was wrong... I was wrong! I should never have done it and I'm terribly sorry."

"Yes, I know," she spoke in a whisper. "But why was it wrong? You were free, weren't you? I told you to go find... someone better."

He was hurting her again, he felt her pain, and it became his pain. "There's no one better, at least not for me. But free? I was never free to hurt you... and I'm... I don't want to come across as conceited but I'm better than that. If I hadn't been so..." He stopped himself. No more excuses.

Lisa cast her eyes down. "It's my fault. I threw that Coastie in your face to get you jealous... I guess it worked didn't it?"

"It's not your fault. I had just told you I loved you and not an hour later... I was crazy with..." Again, the excuses came up and he squashed them down fiercely. "I'm ashamed of myself and here on my knees, I'm begging you to forgive me."

She put her hands into his hair and began to comb it with her fingers. "If you'll forgive me... for the Coastie and, and breaking up with you in the first place."

Amazingly and childishly, his jealousy over the Coastie flared up. He wanted to ask her what exactly he should be forgiving her for, but instead said, "I forgive you for the Coastie, but if you are taking me back, then there's nothing to forgive about the break up. I needed it. We... needed it."

In the dark, she smiled and he smiled back. Pulling him off of his knees she said, "Come on, I want to show you something." She led them around the seawall and he quickly realized they were heading to her apartment building.

Her dad was out on patrol and was not scheduled back for at least two more days, so he figured he was about to meet her mother. With all of the rumors he became more than a little apprehensive and as they headed up the elevator, he steeled himself for a meeting with a woman who had a very nasty reputation around the island.

Her apartment however, was empty. Will could tell the moment he walked in.

"Where's your mom?" He looked around and could immediately tell that Lisa had been cleaning. The place smelled of ammonia and furniture polish, yet it also had an underlying odor of ashtrays and greasy cooking.

"I kicked my mom out two days ago." Lisa crossed her arms, resolutely almost as if challenging him to find fault with what she had just said.

"Wow! She just left?"

"No I had to threaten to call social services on her. She took all the money, mine and dad's, and left." Will shook his head in wonder at her; she had a spine of steel to do such a thing.

With her mother gone, he relaxed and glanced around and as he did, he noted that her eyes followed his everywhere they went. Lisa licked her lips nervously. She was worried he would look down on her home. Purposely he overlooked the worn and dilapidated furniture and instead went to the pictures on the walls.

"How old were you in this one?" It was picture of Lisa in a purple and white cheerleading outfit; she smiled happily for the camera.

"That was when I was at Bourne High for my freshmen year. I still have the outfit," she added suggestively, but Will could see she instantly regretted it. "Come here." She led him down a short hallway to what was obviously her bedroom.

It was clean and smelled good. There were pictures of the two of them about the room and in each they were holding hands and looked very happy. She grew more anxious and self-consciously straightened a few of her girlish knickknacks.

"I like your room." He went to a spot on the wall that had until very recently held a poster. "Not John Travolta, I hope."

"Andy Gibb," she said sheepishly.

They smiled at each other and everything was normal for a few moments. But then she stared at his lips and her mouth came open; she went to him and kissed him deeply. Guiding him to the bed, she pushed him down onto it and they kissed as lovers do, but there was a frantic nature to her kissing, that reminded him of the night they broke up. Yet even so, he became quickly aroused and she put her hand on him and squeezed him gently. He moaned in his kiss and she broke off.

"Ok. Ok," Lisa spoke to herself as if coming to a decision and nodded her head up and down. Her hands shook as they went to his belt and fumbled at it.

Will was sad for her. He took her hands in his and brought them to his chest.

"It's ok, Lisa. You don't have to do this." He wanted it very badly, but he also wanted to be a gentlemen.

She stood up and her eyes brimmed over with tears. "Is it her? Is it because of her? You don't find me attractive, I know." Lisa went to her mirror, looked long at it and then took a brush and started to tear at the tangled mess of her hair.

"Don't, please." Will went to her and held her arms. "Of course I'm attracted to you." For emphasis he pushed hard against her. "And this doesn't have anything to do with Amy. It has to do with you and me." He turned her around, kissed her softly, and then gently rubbed his nose to hers. "I want the first time to be special."

"You mean my first time," she said stiffly.

"I mean mine and yours, yes."

"You want me to believe... ok sure. Sure. If that's what you want me to think." Breaking away from him, she went and stood leaning against the wall.

"This is why it can't be tonight. We have to get past this first."

"No, that is why it *has* to be tonight," she replied and moved to the light switch. The room became lit only by the bright, full moon. He watched with eyes that widened slowly as she stripped out of her clothes.

"She is still all over you, Will. Her scent, her hands, her mouth. I bet you can still feel it, can't you?" It was true, he could still feel her. Lisa continued, "The best way to get rid of a stain like that is to rub it away."

She reached out and began to run her hands up and down him. He gasped...

Another walk in the night. This one far different. He breathed in, his lungs expanding largely, and instead of the sigh he had been exhaling constantly for days, he gave a little laugh. The other night he had run from Amy, but tonight he had lingered long in a deep kiss with Lisa.

Will had indeed shown her what true love was and he had never felt more like a man than at that very moment. He was so happy he skipped a few times, something he couldn't remember ever doing.

Talitha was another non-skipper. He couldn't recall her ever skipping, even as a young girl. Katie on the other hand, skipped almost everywhere. She even had three speeds of skipping, depending on her frame of mind. Will was in such a good mood that he considered trying the three out, but decided the night wasn't nearly advanced enough for that. It was just past 11:30 pm, and there was always the possibility one of his friends was lurking about.

Standing in the middle of the Green, he checked to see if his parent's bedroom light was on, but the great leafy canopy of the oak trees blocked his view. However, he could see the Harris house next door and in one of the upper floor windows, a single light burned.

Amy was going to be a thorn in his side as long as they were neighbors. Lisa had forgiven him, but there was no way short of brain damage she would ever forget. He'd have to endure her insecurity and he felt that he could handle that. But it was Amy, who was a vindictive witch, who gave him cause to worry the most. She'd no doubt be petty and cruel and he wondered to what ends she would go to get what she wanted or to get her revenge when she didn't get it.

He decided to pray on it.

His latest prayers had been answered in the most complete way, so he lay down in the cool thick grass of the Green. But after struggling to come up with an anti-bitch prayer, he decided he'd better handled Amy without divine intervention, so he simply thanked God for his blessings. When he was done, he laid there feeling the greatest contentment.

Something at the corner of his eye caught his attention and turning his head, he realized that from his current angle, he could see his house from under the leafy boughs of the oaks. One second slipped away from him as he stared, and then he sprang up, running with great speed toward the house.

In that second he saw a light in the room above the porch blinking rapidly on and off. It was Katie's room. The light wasn't the warm inviting gold that he had expected, but was red and dim, and the frantic way it flashed out into the night bespoke fear or danger.

He threw off the happy feelings of a moment before and sprinted to the house in seconds, bounding up the red brick stairs of the porch in a single leap. Will neither knew nor cared what he was going to confront when he opened the front door and he didn't hesitate a moment, but reached for the handle of the door, hoping it was unlocked.

But it was locked... and shockingly cold. It felt frozen, colder than any metal he had ever felt even in the deepest of winter. His hand stung with the cold of it and he snatched it away.

Briefly, he stared with revulsion at the unnaturally cold knob, his mind struggling to come to terms with how such a thing was possible. Then he heard a

thud from above him... it was a heavy sound and in no way did it belong in that room at that time of night.

Katie!

She was in trouble. Fear started to flow through him, but it was mostly a fear for her safety and it got him moving. He vaulted over the railing of the porch, landing in the little flowerbed beside it and sped around the side of the house.

As he reached the back entrance he understood that this door might also be locked and if it was, he made up his mind that he was going to break it down regardless. Without a pause he made to open the door and this knob too was deeply cold, but it had been painted over so many times that there wasn't the sharp sting of freezing naked metal as at the front door. It still hurt however, but he ignored it and the door flew open, propelled by his strength and urgency.

A wave of bitter, dead cold swept over him, stopping him in the doorway.

The cold struck him full in the face and he gasped, but the gasp was weak, his lungs burned from his sprint, and that first breath of cold air was like an ice pick in his chest. His back felt almost on fire compared to the deep cold sliding its frozen fingers down the front of his shirt. The night had been a warm one and he thought he could feel the sweat from his body freezing in place along his neck and down his arms.

He staggered for the briefest second. It wasn't the cold that had him clutching the door with his sore right hand; there was something dreadful, a current of evil, running beneath the cold.

The feeling that something was wrong in the house, that he had sensed lying in the grass of the Village Green, had been instinctual. He had no facts to back up his crazed sense of desperation and even as he ran, a small part of him had held out hope he'd find nothing wrong. But now there was no hope of that. A great terrible presence, a thing of unimaginable foulness had emerged in baleful triumph and was in the house. It was a black-hearted evil that was beyond the pathetic human notion of the word and Will could feel its unnatural presence with his every cell.

Fear of the awful creature held him in place for only a second but something stronger inside him drove him forward across the old linoleum of the kitchen to the back stairs. Love? Loyalty? Raw courage? He had no time to search his emotions and Will was on the second stair before it realized he was in the house.

Will was not ready for what happened next.

There was no way he could have been. The foul creature was on the second floor just outside Katie's door. It perceived Will through the intervening walls and stairs, and looked upon him...and through him. If the boy had been staggered before by the cold and the feeling of perverse evil on the air, he was now literally knocked off his feet and fell back down the two stairs, landing hard on the kitchen floor.

It had not been physical. His mind had been open, and despite his fear, inquisitive. He was untrained, unprepared and what's more, he was still just a boy.

The demon—and somehow Will knew now that it was a demon—had poured out its evil simply with a look, and being open as he was, Will took it all in. Misery, torture, anguish and more, all in fantastic proportions invaded him, so much so

that Will's mind short-circuited and his head snapped back as if he had been punched.

Collapsing, he lay on the linoleum and his every muscle went taught and straining. His legs and arms were straight out, while his eyes were wide and bulging. His mind and soul were being shown the ancient darkness of the demon and in the few seconds before the soft scream came, Will saw just enough to send his mind skittering on the edge of reason.

Luckily for him, a muffled scream rolled down the corridors of the near silent home and the pain and terror ended as abruptly as it had begun. The demon had looked away.

"Heee... heee... heee... heee... heee." The high-pitched noise came uncontrollably from deep in his throat, as Will thrashed and convulsed on the floor. When he could, he tore at his exposed face and arms, rubbing and scratching. Though he knew he wasn't, it felt as though his body was covered with a greasy, malignant film and he had a desperate need to get it off.

"Aaaaaiiiiee."

A scream from upstairs made him remember the first one of a few seconds before, it already seemed as if it came from a distant dream. Within moments, he forgot the foul sensation on his skin and struggled up to his feet. And it was a struggle. He found he wasn't able to move in a normal manner, his joints were stiff and he felt crazily like a robot.

Once up, he looked upon the back staircase with horror. No longer was he filled with the brash reckless courage that had spurred him into the house, instead he felt that certain doom awaited him up those stairs. He knew that he might already be dead, had it not been for the scream from...

"Katie," he said aloud.

That he loved his little sister was unquestionable, but he didn't know if he could face the demon, not up those stairs, not directly face to face. He stood in the kitchen and four precious seconds slipped by, as an internal battle took place within him. To run or to stay. His head swiveled back and forth between the stairs and the kitchen door.

Finally, he let out a quiet, whiny noise, "Ooh nooo," and ran in a jerking motion toward the stairs.

He went up rigidly, his knees almost unable to bend far enough to make each step. The staircase was dark and narrow. He kept his head up, although he was deathly afraid at what he would see above. As he neared the landing, his chest filled with great physical pain and he choked back a cry of despair.

There was a body on the landing.

It was either Talitha or his mother. They were so similar in size and appearance that in the dim light he couldn't tell which it was. It hurt him so badly to look at the body that he found he couldn't breathe. He took two more slow steps up and though he wanted to go on, his fear stopped him just short of the landing. His feet were heavy as lead so that he couldn't get them to budge and he had to content himself with standing on his tip-toes, child-like to get a better look. The darkness was amazing but he was able to see something white near the body, a notebook.

Talitha! It had to be her.

Tears sprung from his eyes and he went nearly to the top of the stairs. She laid half in the long hall of the second floor, and half on the landing. From where he stood Will couldn't see any marks on her and a wild hope filled him that she was simply unconscious. Wanting to be sure, he reached out, but just at that moment, he became aware of movement.

He flinched back, but it was only a piece of paper from Talitha's notebook fluttering down the hall. It was then that he noticed the wind for the first time. The hall felt practically breezy, and though the wind was cold, it was far warmer than the surrounding air. It blew from behind him and went straight along the hall and as he watched, the paper skipped and flipped about, picking up speed. At the far end, it spun as if caught up in a tornado and disappeared into a hellish, unnatural darkness.

The demon was there.

Down the hall in front of Katie's door—it was either the darkness itself or deep in it. Will was afraid to even glance in its direction and he wondered if he would have the mental strength to do more than try to get Talitha out of there.

He reached with his inflexible arms and made to pick her up, but she was dead weight. And there was something else too, not only was she terribly cold, stiff, and lifeless, there was a nasty sticking feeling to her skin. Just the briefest touch of her bare flesh repulsed him and he pulled away or he tried to. It felt as though his hands had become slightly glued to hers and he had to almost peel them away. The simplest touch had been horrible, not because of the cold or the weird stickiness, but because there had been a hungry, greedy demand emanating from her.

Through her skin, she fed off his warmth, and it had the feel of the demon to it. His body gave an involuntary shudder and he realized that he might never have recognized it had it not been for those horrible few moments when the demon had focused on him. But it was there and he was frightened for her.

Will knew that time was slipping by and he had to hurry if he had any chance at getting her away, but he hesitated at touching her bare skin again. It had been too awful and the thought of a human sized leech came to his mind. Suppressing the image with a mental discipline that he didn't know he possessed he reached out to grab her. Seizing her by the shirt, he slid her across the floor to him and gripped her from behind, under her armpits. The leech-like feeling was coming off her so greatly that his shirt seemed to be stuck to hers and his biceps that touched her bare arms went numb from her cold. Grimacing and gritting his teeth against the feel, he hauled her backward down the first two steps.

That was as far as he got carrying her. Whether purposely or not, Talitha pulled his heat and energy from him in endless gluttony, and his world started to turn gray and then black at the edges.

He staggered and leaned back against the wall of the stairwell, still holding her to him and the darkened staircase spun briefly. And with what felt like sadness, he knew he was going to faint. With barely enough strength, he turned, so that she landed on him and together they slid backwards down the steps. Thump, thump, thump, his head hit six of the stairs before he caught up against a baseboard that checked his momentum. He lay sprawled on the stairs and struggled weakly like a dying turtle trapped on its back. From that position, he felt

his life draining from him by degrees and his only hope was that his death might help Talitha in some way.

As he felt himself on the brink of death, Will's eyes rolled in his head and he saw a great figure standing over him.

His father was there on the backstairs, but it seemed that he was more than his father now... he was Commander William Jern.

He stood looking up the stairs, his eyes hard, and his face set in determination and anger. Will tried to call out to him, to warn him, but he failed to make even a gasp. Where Will had struggled to even pull his sister to his chest, his father reached down with both hands and threw the girl over his shoulder in one powerful motion.

The relief Will felt was intense and immediate; he could breathe again. He took a long draught of air and tried to pull himself up but only flailed around awkwardly with his stiff arms smacking the walls. His father, with his daughter over his shoulder draining the life from him, reached down with his left hand and gripped Will's shirt, his fingernails digging deep furrows in his son's skin.

With one tremendous tug, Will was lifted onto his feet, but his knees buckled and the Commander was obliged to slam him bodily against the wall to keep him upright.

"Get out of the house!" Commander Jern ordered, quietly but with compelling force.

"But mom and Katie," Will said weakly.

"I'll take care of them. Now go!" His father's body gave a small spastic jerk and Will could see the tan of his face going pale white. He gave Will a small shove and it was all the boy could do to maintain his balance as he wobbled the rest of the way down the stairs. Behind him, he heard his father yell in his sea-going voice—the one that could carry through a hurricane: "Gayle! Katie! Get out of the house! Now's your chance! Run!"

Will wanted to turn and tell his father about the demon outside Katie's door, but there was no need. *It* was coming for them. The feeling of the approaching fiend was unmistakable.

It caused an inhuman terror in Will and in a panic, he lurched through the kitchen toward the back door. He no longer felt simply robot-like, now he was a drunken robot. His head swam in dizziness and he struck things as he walked. His vision tunneled so that the objects that he struck did not come into focus until after he hit them; the sink, a chair, the stove.

Finally, he reached the door but it seemed stuck and Will using the last of his energy was just strong enough to open it.

Heat blasted his face; blessed heat. He paused just long enough to take a deep breath before trying to make his escape. Pushing into the heat of the cool night, he made it to the other side of the street but there his foot caught on the curb and he fell face first into the grass of the golf course.

Talitha had done something to him, or perhaps the demon had, but either way he could barely lift his arms and it took him a couple of seconds of straining just to roll over. When he did, he saw a kaleidoscope of his father. It was as if he were completely surrounded by the same man and he was given a rough shake.

"Are you ok?" The faces used a single voice that drifted in from far away.

Will could only nod his head. His father said something else that he couldn't understand and then was gone. Will tried to get up, but the movement was too much and he fell back in a swoon. Just before he passed out, his head lolled to the side and he saw his sister Talitha lying in the grass next to him. Her eyes were glassy and stared lifelessly at the stars above. She was dead.

Chapter 8

Gayle and the Demon. June 4th 1980

1

The smell wasn't real, or so she thought, but it permeated her dreams and it was that which woke her. Gayle found that odd since she couldn't remember smelling anything in a dream before.

The smell had been wickedly pungent and in the dream, it had overpowered her and left her weak and gagging. Once long ago, Gayle had come too close to a candle she had been about to blow out, and a little of her hair had swung out over the flame instantly catching on fire. She had put it out quickly and lost about an inch, but the smell was nasty and lingered long in the room and clung to her clothes.

The dream had that smell.

It had been a chaotic dream that hardly made any sense, but the part with the smell came back vividly to her when she woke.

In the dream, she had been in her bedroom when she heard something strange on the backstairs. Without knowing why, and regardless of the anxiety that she suddenly felt, she went down the hall to investigate. A terrifically foul, reeking grey smoke filled the stairs top-to-bottom. It had that odor of burning hair but also, and far worse, a smell of burning flesh.

She felt an immediate urge to vomit and while retching in her throat she stumbled to the nearest room, Talitha's. It was empty and Gayle panicked, fearing that it was Talitha's body being burned. The dream took on a confused and hectic tempo as she dashed from empty room to empty room, looking for Talitha at first, but then anyone, until standing in the kitchen she realized that her family had abandoned her.

A sound from the basement made her go to the stairs leading down. Though she tried, she could not make herself go further than the top step and from there she could see a hellish glow emanating from the boiler room. There was utter silence in the basement, except for a horrifying sound of popping and snapping and... sizzling. Gayle heaved repeatedly in her dream, but didn't vomit.

Kneeling in the doorway of the basement and breathing heavily she was still gagging when a shadow overpowered the glow. Gayle fled from the fearsome shadow, somehow ending up in Katie's room. She had been in the room earlier in

the dream and it had been empty, but now boxes from moving day stacked higher than her head formed a labyrinth.

The room at first had been dim so that the corners of it couldn't be seen but as she opened the first box, the ceiling light turned on. It was bright white at first but then it started to flash from white to red repeatedly. In a wild flurry, she began to open the boxes one after another, and there seemed to be hundreds of them. Finally, she found Katie standing in a very tall box with steep sides.

"It's time," Katie said casually.

"I know! There's something in the house, we gotta go!" Gayle reached down and picked up Katie as if she were still a baby and cradling her, spun to the door, only to find it wreathed in the sick smoke.

"We can't get out!"

With the words echoing in her mind, Gayle came awake, her brown eyes wide, her breathing ragged and harsh. Laying there in the dark, her first conscious act was to give the air a tentative sniff. The room smelled as it always had and she relaxed into her pillow and sighed in relief.

It was then she noticed the room was bitter cold, like it had been their first night in the house. Rolling over she went to snuggle and steal some of William's warmth, but his side of the bed was empty.

She sat up quick, her senses going to full alert. A glance at the clock showed it to be 11:28, and she went down a very short mental checklist of all the places William would likely be.

- 1) Bathroom.
- 2) Family room watching end of baseball game.
- 3) Kitchen getting a snack.
- 4) Having an affair?

This last one was silly, but there had been no other options.

Gayle felt keyed up, not at all sleepy, and just a little bit afraid. It was the weird dream. She still had a little of the feeling of being trapped it sent a nervousness thrilling through her.

Deciding that she didn't want to be alone, she slipped out of bed, surprised to note that it was colder than she had at first thought. Luckily, she was wearing Talitha's warmest pajamas. Talitha had felt far too grown up to wear pajamas with pictures of baby ducks on them and had taken to stealing her mom's silk PJs. This had been fine with Gayle since the little ducks made her feel young again.

Tonight she wished they were footy pajamas like the ones Katie still sometimes wore. Quickly, the cold began affecting her toes and she went around the bed to the closet to get her slippers. She stopped just as she bent down to get them—William's tennis shoes were not in their normal place. He was a neat man and a creature of habit. His keys were *always* hanging by the door. His wallet and watch were *always* on his dresser and his tennis shoes were *always* on the floor next to the closet.

This little thing, the missing shoes, bothered her and she worried over it. Did this mean he wasn't home? What could he be doing out so late? Was there something wrong with Willy J? The idea of something wrong with her son caused her to start moving again. She left her room in a hurry and saw that the family

room, where their TV sat, was cold, dark, and empty. Deep down she had never really expected her husband to be there.

She went to Talitha's room next but, before she could look in a noise came from downstairs. It sounded like it came from deep in the house, low down. It was a deep vibrating sound of metal against metal and it echoed throughout the house.

Gayle's eyes shot wide open and she took an involuntary step back. "What the hell was that?" she whispered.

The fear she had been experiencing had been a small embarrassing thing, but now suddenly, unexpectedly, it bloomed and bordered on terror. She had no idea what that noise could be, she only knew she was afraid of whatever had caused it.

The cold intensified noticeably and she started to shiver despite the ducky pajamas. The back staircase was only a couple of feet from her and it seemed to be the source of the cold and now her breath was a fog in the dim light and her fear kept ratcheting up until it became so great that she had to fight the temptation to run back down the hall. She tried to rationalize the fear, but it was useless; her mind could not come up with any reason for it, other than the obvious. There was something wrong with the house... something unnatural. Something unwanted had entered their home and it was the something that had made the huge sound in the basement.

She felt the greatest desire, in fact the greatest need to get out of the house right then. There was an actual danger here... something indefinable at the moment, but still palpable and she knew she had to get her three children and leave as quick as possible.

Talitha's door stood partially open and Gayle slipped in on her quickly numbing toes. The carpet felt wonderfully warm compared to the hardwood floors, but she didn't stop to thaw her feet since she only needed to take a few strides into the room to see that her daughter's bed was empty. It had been slept in recently and still held a touch of body heat.

Gayle's dream came back to her then: the frantic running, the empty rooms... the feeling of being trapped. This last thought caused her to spin back to the door, afraid there'd be something blocking it, but it stood open and empty. However, that fact didn't matter and the power of her fear affected her judgment. She ran to the door as if in a race, and her momentum nearly carried her into the hall.

She couldn't let that happen, If she did she would then run down the hall, and then down the stairs and then out the front door. With a tremendous effort of will she stopped herself.

Another noise from the house came at her then, a shriek. She didn't know if it was a shriek of twisting metal or a shriek from a girl in fantastic terror, and she felt it as well as heard it. Her hands had been on the doorframe of Talitha's room and the shriek vibrated through them.

The willpower, which so recently had kept her from bolting, dried up in the face of this new sound. The need to run was fierce, but concern for her children's safety was stronger. Gayle looked up the darkened staircase to where her son would be, and her breathing became frantic. He was a deep sleeper and there was still a good chance he was up there right then, not knowing the danger... the unknown danger... that was so close.

But his room was so far away. In fact, it was the farthest room from any sort of safety and she was having trouble forcing herself in that direction.

He's already gone. He ran away and left you alone. They all left you... remember the dream? And they left you trapped in the house with... oh yes, with it, the thing that devours bodies.

The thought caused her shivering to go into overdrive so that she began shaking violently. Her willpower drained completely and she turned away from the still unknown danger and as she did, she turned her back on her son.

She saw Katie's bedroom door and hope flared in her.

You could go save her! No one would blame you for the loss of Willy J, if you were busy saving your daughter.

The thought was so rational and convincing that she almost went down the hall, but at the last moment, she noticed that her eyes had slipped off Katie's door and were now on the great staircase... if she went that way she would run. She would run screaming from the house and probably not stop until she reached the ferry.

2

"I'll come back for you," Gayle whispered, picturing her golden-haired daughter. "I promise."

With a mental struggle, Gayle yanked her eyes away from that end of the hall...what she considered the safe end. It was at least warmer down there and lighter. This end, near the backstairs, was dark and becoming cruelly cold.

Gayle went to the stairs trying to hurry but her feet would not listen and her legs trembled, threatening to buckle under her as she crept along as silently as she could.

Seconds ticked by and the cold on the backstairs intensified; there was a breeze blowing straight down from the attic toward the kitchen. It was as if a current of frozen terror washed over her as she began to climb. The feeling was so bizarre that she wondered briefly if she was still dreaming. In her mind the stairs began to feel like a tall, jagged cliff. With each step up, she left safety further and further behind and after a while, her hands gripped the railings tight as if she thought that they alone kept her from falling.

Soon she began to pant in her fear and her eyes were wild and twitched and skittered about. She kept looking back down the stairs, fearful of what could be creeping up from behind. She knew *It* was down there; the thing that had made the noises, the thing that ate bodies. *It* radiated a harsh unnatural feeling that caused her nerves to thrum and her heart to race. For now *It* was in the basement, but she had a terrible knowledge: *It* was coming up, slowly at the moment yet she knew that could change at any time.

The top step came into view and she grew even more fearful. Once in the attic she would no longer be able to look back down the stairs, and the thing could come up without her knowing, and she would be trapped... and then...

A shudder ran down her back, but still she managed to force herself on until she reached the final step. At that point she couldn't go forward. It was very much like her first time on the high dive at the pool when she was a kid. Gayle had

frozen there, stricken with fear of the great height, and eventually a lifeguard had to come up and help her down. But there was no lifeguard here; in fact it was she who was supposed to be saving Willy J.

Yet that was the rub.

Deep inside she knew he wasn't sleeping in his bed, she knew it for a hard fact. She was sure that Willy J wasn't even in the house. He and the rest of her family had abandoned her, perhaps even sacrificed her to appease *the thing* in the basement.

Somewhere below her, a door crashed open with a loud bang and wired as she was, Gayle turned and bolted; her face set in a huge terrified, grimace. She was halfway down the first set of stairs before her hands shot out of their own volition. Her fingernails scraped and dug at the walls, causing them to break and peel back. There was intense pain but still she clawed at the walls, scraping away deep layers of paint until her momentum had been checked. Panting, she clutched her aching fingers to her chest and stood, shaking. There was no way she could leave her boy. She turned to go back up but her foot caught the step and she stumbled.

He's not here! He's gone! Run while you still can! her mind screamed at her. Gayle started to cry.

She thought of Willy J then, remembering him as a baby. He was so precious and beautiful. She had fallen in love with him the moment he was born, and she knew that he loved her just as much.

He would never leave me! she thought, angry at herself. With that she sprang to her feet and ran up the stairs as lightly and as quickly as she could. The top stair came into view in a second and she barely hesitated before closing her eyes and dashing past it on feather-light feet. Willy J's was shut which she took for a good sign since he always slept with it that way and she had it open and was in the room in a flash. She would wake him as quietly as possible and then they'd make a run for it.

However...

His bed was neatly made; the top sheet was folded back perfectly, just as she had taught him and the corners were all tucked in with the military precision that his father preferred. Willy J was not in the neat bed... he was not even in the room. For seconds Gayle stared in stunned disbelief.

She *was* alone.

"They left me," she moaned aloud to the bed.

Tears started to gush from her eyes and she crumpled to the floor sobbing. It felt like a knife had been driven into her stomach and slowly it twisted. She looked back at the door; it had shut at some point in the last few seconds. The door had been open... she knew it had been open... but now it was closed, and she feared there could be something horrible... just on the other side of it.

Within her a feeling of being trapped bloomed. It was sudden and overwhelming, and a fear-induced madness took over her thinking.

She had to hide!

The thought sent her crawling to the bed with a plan to bury herself beneath it. Deep down she knew it was a stupid and useless plan, but her fear was so overwhelming it could not be denied. The underside of the bed was obviously where Willy J shoved everything when doing a quick cleaning and was too crowded

to fit even her small body. With crazed desperation, Gayle started to pull clothes out to make room for herself, but then, like shining rain, coins from a pair of his pants, began to drop on the floor. It made a fearful racket and Gayle resembled a playful cat scrambling around after them, but stopped with the realization that *It* now knew where she was. Just as quick as it had come to her, she threw out the foolish plan to hide and forgetting the coins still rolling about, she ran to the nearest window. She couldn't hide... but she could jump!

Standing on her toes she eyed the distance to the ground, it was only thirty-five or so. Insane with fear she said, "I can make it. It's not that far!"

With her small muscles bunched she strained to open the window but it seemed to be painted shut. She tried again and panted, "It's not that far," over and over again, as she threw her all into it. The window wouldn't budge and the same was true of the second one. Winded, she paused and looked out. The night seemed so lovely and peaceful; she could imagine herself jumping from the third story and simply flying away. However, the windows wouldn't budge and the glass was the new style and she didn't think she could break it. And if she could, the breaking glass would be loud, and *It* would come, and *It* would eat her.

It would eat her slowly, painfully. Enjoying the pain, far more than the taste of Gayle's flesh. Moreover, Gayle would be alive and screaming during all this, because that was the best part. She would be alive, while *It* ate her. Gayle would be alive a long time.

Just as she knew the beds would be all empty, she also knew this about the creature, and for her it was a cold hard fact.

It had been just over five minutes since Gayle awoke from her terrible dream, and in that time she had been very close to true panic. But being close to panicking and actually panicking, was like the difference between standing very close to a speeding train and standing in front one. The vision of being eaten alive tipped the scale and tipped her mind as well.

She turned and flew to the door and tore at the knob in a frenzy.

The door opened and Gayle sped down the hallway with a wild look in her eyes. She did not see the hall or the dark stairs beyond. In fact she saw nothing, and she couldn't tell if she was running from danger or to danger. By some miracle her feet hit the first two steps properly, but none of the rest. Stumbling, she flew forward, coming down hard on her hands and forearms in the middle of the stairs.

"Ooof!" The wind was knocked from her but it didn't seem to matter. Her body was beyond feeling or even controlling itself and she kicked crazily with her legs as she flailed with her arms.

Seconds passed as she attempted to right herself. Finally gaining her feet, she threw herself forward and it was only due to her lack of momentum that she didn't injure herself as she hit the wall at the landing. Bouncing off it like a pinball, she next slammed into the railing and this too she ricocheted off of. Her arms thrashed around and her feet again failed to find the stairs properly, and she fell in a jumbled ball. She hit her head on the landing of the second floor with what to her was a deafening, CRACK!

Her panic disappeared completely.

There was a vaguely remembered pain in her hands and arms, but then that was gone too. There had also been cold... yes, but now just numbness. She lay in

the very dark staircase and could barely feel her arms and legs, but that didn't seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter and for how long she lay there she didn't know.

Blinking cleared Gayle's vision somewhat and she could see her legs and feet and the ducky pajamas. Her first very dizzy thought was that she must be sitting on a swing. She couldn't really tell if she was right side up or not and the swinging sensation continued, slow at first, but quickly it got worse. The numbness had been pleasant, but now going back and forth, she felt like throwing up and she rolled over to try to right herself.

It was such an effort get to her knees that she felt that anything else was beyond her capabilities. Her brain was a confused whirl of thoughts that were unable to complete themselves and seconds slipped by as she simply stared at the floor of the landing. As she stared she noticed a small movement on the floor just below her face. It took all of her will, but she managed to focus on that little thing...it was water. Little drops of water were hitting the floor right in front of her.

Rain? She thought thickly, but then her vision blurred and she knew they were tears. It took her a moment to remember why she was crying: her family had left her alone in the house with some sort of monster. However, monsters were only in the movies, weren't they? She didn't really know just then.

"Why are you just sitting here?" Strangely it was her own lips that asked the question, but she didn't remember thinking it. How odd? But the question had been a good one... why was she just sitting there? And why couldn't she think of an answer? The truth of course was that her brain had been sloshed around the inside of her skull and she had a concussion, but Gayle didn't know that and she could only kneel crying in the dark.

What about Katie? What about your promise? The thought seeped in through the fog of her thinking.

"No, Katie is long gone. She left with the rest of them."

She's in the box, remember?

But that had been a dream and this wasn't a dream, this was the...movies?

That didn't make any sense "What?" Gayle said aloud.

Katie!

Yes, Katie. Gayle focused on her daughter and the confusion slowly drained away and she remembered where she was... and what had happened.

"I'll get Katie. I'll get her and run," Gayle said to the floor of the landing.

With a tremendous effort, she struggled to lift her head and when she did she saw it was too late for Katie and far too late for herself.

3

The stairs at the bottom were pitch black, beyond any natural explanation.

It was a darkness through which no light could penetrate, and it was the source of all fear. It was powerful and eternal and awake.

And it was Evil.

The malevolence of it came off in waves. It was beyond Gayle's ability to comprehend or to cope, and her mind was taken up with it—independent thought

became impossible. She wilted back onto the stairs and looked down between her frozen feet in dreadful fascination.

It seemed deep in its blackness, as if she were just seeing the initial layers of it and a part of her screamed, *RUN!* However, she couldn't; physically and mentally it was an impossibility. She simply stared, hypnotized as black tendrils crept up the wall and railings toward her. They seemed hungry for her, for her heat, for her life.

The blackness would have engulfed her whole had she not been rescued then—it wasn't William, swinging in at the last minute that saved her—but a little girl's scream from far away.

"Mommy!"

Her mind clung to that scream as a drowning cat would to a stick. She clawed onto it and held it with maniacal fervor. Gayle needed that scream, it was real, and it was natural. Her mind had been completely taken up by the black creature creeping slowly toward her, but now she latched onto the scream and analyzed it, refusing to think past it. It felt like a scream from years gone by, but she recognized it at once, it was Talitha.

But it sounded like a very young Talitha. Maybe it was Katie? No, Gayle didn't think so. Katie was a practiced and accomplished screamer; she had heard her youngest scream so often that it was unmistakable. Conversely, she couldn't remember Talitha ever screaming, not like this at least. Confusion reigned over her, but she knew that scream one way or the other, and she used it to focus her thinking—she had to get out of there. There was only one direction left to her, down the hall toward Katie's room.

Gayle struggled to get up using the railings to support her shaking legs. She refused to look at the blackness, but instead stared at the wall. As inconspicuously as possible, she hugged it and barely breathing, slipped around the corner and into the hall.

Out of sight of the blackness, the fog that had clouded her mind seemed to lift and Gayle suddenly knew what she had to do. She took off in a dead sprint for Katie's door. As she passed the great stair, she eyed it longingly and with tremendous shame. It was so tantalizingly close...all she had to do was forget Katie and she could be out the door and halfway to the ferry in moments.

Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to look away.

She was at Katie's door and through it in the next second. Foolishly, she expected the room to be full of empty moving boxes, but it looked the same as it had three hours before when she had kissed Katie good night. It was the same with only one small item missing...Katie.

Her bed was empty. This wasn't heart breaking to Gayle, like when she had seen Talitha and Willy J's beds empty. No, after so much disappointment this was what she had thought she would see. Yet determined to at least try to find her daughter before she fled from the house, Gayle went to the toy box and ripped back the lid. She fished about in it for a second, before jumping up and running to the closet. This she tore open so savagely that it made her realize her panic was creeping up into her throat again. She yanked the clothes hanging there, back and forth giving the closet a quick but thorough inspection... no Katie.

There! No one could say she hadn't at least tried. Now she could run away. Gayle dashed to the door, but just as she gripped the knob a small whimper sounded behind her. At the sight of the empty closet she had experienced a tiny feeling of relief but it died a quick death at the sound.

Slowly she spun about and saw the one place that Katie could be... under the bed... across the room. This meant that Gayle would have to leave the door and the safety it promised to get to her daughter. This brought back the panic almost full-fledged but it wasn't a total feeling. She also felt shame as her hand refused to come away from the knob. Her rebellious hand knew where safety lay and it wasn't across the room. Gayle had to mentally pry her fingers away and only then was she able to throw herself to the carpeted floor in front of the bed. In the dim light, she saw the little blonde girl curled up far back against the wall, Katie had her thumb corked square in her mouth while tears ran around it as though it were a rock jutting from a river.

Without hesitation, Gayle reached in but her arms were too short to reach that far back, so she had to wiggle in after her daughter. She felt terribly exposed in that position— half under the bed— unable to run or fight, fearing what might be behind her. And now the trapped panicky feeling began to build up in her so that she unceremoniously grabbed her daughter by the arm and dragged her out.

The second they were free of the bed, Katie jumped up and immediately hugged her mother tight and fierce, but Gayle's mind was screaming that her time was up. She had spent too many precious seconds in the room already and with a hard desperate heart, she pried her daughter off of her and set her on the ground, a little shivering bundle of pink.

Yet when she turned to the door, the hard feeling left her. It was replaced by the renewed sensation of being trapped and this grew beyond her ability to overcome. Escape was within reach. Gayle had only to take two steps and reach out for the knob but she couldn't force her feet onward. She became convinced that the thing was right on the other side of the door—blocking their way—preparing to wrap its darkness around them—preparing to eat her and Katie at its leisure.

This image froze her feet to the floor.

"Mommy," Katie whined imploringly, shaking like a leaf. Her little teeth began to clatter against themselves.

"We gotta get out of here," Gayle said partially to Katie and partially to herself and she knew in her heart that it was true. However, she still shied from the doorknob. What lay beyond the door held so much terror for Gayle that, impulsively, she jumped up on the bed and went to the window. "It's not that far. I can make a rope out of the sheets." She envisioned an easy get away, sliding down knotted sheets and running off into the night.

Only the window, like those in the attic wouldn't open. She beat at the frame, but saw that it had been painted shut. Briefly, she considered breaking the window, but the thought of the noise, and what it would attract, squashed that idea.

"Where's daddy?" Katie asked in an urgent whisper.

"I don't know... he's... he's. I don't know where." Saying this made her miss him terribly. This was the kind of situation he was built for and she knew if he were there, she could turn to him and say, 'What to do we do?' And he would know. As

it was she didn't have a clue. Escape through the window seemed impossible. While to chance the door seemed like certain death, and after seeing those black tendrils on the staircase, she knew that hiding was out of the question. She came to stand squarely between the two options: window and door.

"Do the signal, Mommy. Do the signal!" Katie began blubbering and hissing as quietly as she could and then the little girl started pulling on the ducky pajama shirt, pulling Gayle back to the window. Just then, there was a muffled noise from the hallway and Katie hushed immediately.

They both backed away from the door, staring at it with wide eyes. Seconds slipped by and the two just stood there, waiting, but for what Gayle didn't know. The only thing she did know was that she would not be able to open that door now. Not for anything. She was not a hero like William, she was small and weak and inadequate. Her mind started to freeze up and she could do nothing but stare blankly at the door. Katie however, started to jump up and down, uncontrollably shaking her hands just in front of her chest as if to dry them.

"Call daddy! Please, please, please!"

"I can't the phone is downstairs."

A terrible thought occurred to her: if she left Katie, there was a chance she could make it out alive. The thought just slipped out of the dirty cracks in her mind and presented itself for consideration as though it had every right to... as if it were a legitimate idea. The thought continued: you could both die, being eaten alive, or...

She gasped at her own selfishness. Hot tears streamed down her face in shame and she bent down and hugged her daughter, who hugged her back, but surprising didn't cling and it was she who pushed Gayle away.

"Not the phone! The signal! Daddy said if I was ever afraid, I could put a red blanket over the window, and he would come." She started to jump up and down again in terror and Gayle worried that Katie might be close to panicking.

"Ok. Ok. I'll do it."

Gayle went to the closet that she had just ransacked. She was pretty sure that... there it was... a red blanket. It was sitting on the top shelf. Without losing a second, she yanked it down and hopped onto the bed. Quickly she had the blanket up over the drape rod and the two of them backed away from the window looking at the blanket expectantly, hopefully. Nothing happened. After a second, Gayle felt stupid and disappointed all at once. Katie ran to the switch and started turning it on and off in quick succession, and as she did this, Gayle's dream came back to her, but there was something different. In the dream, there were red *and* white lights flashing, but in the room just then it was only a white light turning on and off.

Moreover, in the dream there had been a smell, and... and an overwhelming sense of being trapped, with no way out. Realizing the foolishness of pinning their hopes on the blanket, she came to a quick decision. They were both going out the door, and no matter what Gayle had to do, Katie would make it outside.

Thankful for the big old-fashioned knobs and locks on all the doors, Gayle bent to look through the oversized keyhole. Down the hall, she could see the *It* in the light streaming in from Talitha's open door. Amazingly, the thing was still on the landing at the other end of the house and Gayle decided they could make it.

Fearful curiosity had her pause just a second to eye the thing. It was huge and black, but what it was, Gayle hadn't a clue. It seemed at least partially made from a chaotic black smoke that swirled and drifted about it and it emanated an intense dire cold. It was evil through and through, whatever it was, and Gayle didn't need or want to see anymore but just as she began to pull away from the keyhole, a flash of white in the blackness caught her eye.

There was something in the swirling smoke—the outline of a person. A moment later a strong gust of the strange wind blew back the edge of the driving madness and Gayle saw a girl standing a foot or two in front of the enormous creature. Talitha.

Gayle suddenly couldn't breathe, her lungs hitched but her throat had tightened to such an extent that airflow was impossible. Her heart fluttered in her chest in a crazy staccato rhythm; it was the only part of her that she could feel.

She saw it all clearly: Talitha at the end of the hall with her back to Gayle, arms outstretched to ward off the creature, but Gayle could see that it was no use. The thing was enormous and seemed to take up the entire landing and looked about to swallow Talitha whole. As she watched, her daughter backed up to the wall and tried to flatten herself out, as if to let the thing pass by. She turned her head in Gayle's direction and the light of the full moon shone on her perfect profile. Gayle was amazed at the look on Talitha's face; it was one of determination and not of fear.

The thing did not pass her by however, but enveloped her in a cloak of blackness until Gayle could no longer see her daughter. Then at the foot of the creature, she saw movement... and there was Talitha... lying on the floor... twitching, and jerking... nearly completely covered in the smoke. As Gayle watched in horror, Talitha was pulled into it.

"No!" Gayle shrieked at the top of her lungs and threw herself back away from the door. She kicked out with her feet, propelling herself to Katie's bed where she thumped up hard but unfelt against it. Tears streamed down her face and she shook her head back and forth in misery.

She had just killed Talitha. It was her fault that her daughter was dead. It had been Talitha's scream and not Katie's that she had heard on the backstairs. Even as she had been wallowing in self-pity about being abandoned, she left her daughter alone to deal with that horrible creature.

Her brain began to shut down and all she could manage was to cry and look at her feet sticking out of the stupid ducky pajamas without really seeing them. The light above her stopped flicking on and off, and when she looked up, she saw Katie bending down to the keyhole to find out what had so upset her mother.

"No, Katie! Don't. Don't."

Katie pulled away and looked ashen faced at her mother. The little girl's pert soft lips quivered and her hands gripped themselves against her chest, trembling as they did.

"Mommy, I'm so ascaed, I..."

Gayle scrambled up and went to her daughter, finally feeling steel enter her backbone. Katie needed her to be strong and so she would be. She crouched down to Katie's level and smiled grimly at her. "There is... there is something out there, something bad, right? We can't stay here any longer. I am going to go out first and distract it. Ok? Then you count to three and then you make a run for it. Can you do that? Run outside, to the Green?"

Poor Katie began to blubber and cling to Gayle. "No, let's wait for daddy, please? I don't want to be here all by myself, please. Please, Mommy?"

"No Katie. We can't wait. Now is our only chance, look at me..." here she stared intently at her daughter. "It will be ok."

"But daddy is coming to save us and I don't want to be alone."

"You are never alone, you hear me? I'll always be with you, right here," Gayle poked Katie's skinny chest. "But now it's time to move and Captain Mommy is giving the orders around here, so let's go!"

Bolstered by her mother's energy, Katie nodded through her tears.

Gayle went to the door and amazingly her resolve began to overpower her fear. Taking one big breath, she then bent down to the keyhole, but flinched back. Where five seconds ago she could look down the hall with ease, now all she could see was blackness. This time, the thing was truly just on the other side of the door.

"Oh my God! Oh my God. Please Lord, don't let it in. Please... please," she said, praying for the first time in years, as she backed away from the door. Her vision tunneled on the knob, knowing that if it began to turn she would crack. Her mind would most certainly break in half and there would be no stopping her from throwing herself through the window. If that knob turned she would go stark-raving mad. If that knob...

Just then, Katie grabbed her shirt and began to cling again. With a little frightened jump, Gayle looked down and the sight of her daughter's pitiful tear-streaked daughter, made her realize that they couldn't just stand there and wait for the knob to turn, they'd have to get out the only other way there was: the window.

Unaware that her eyes were wide and wild, or that she had begun hyperventilating, Gayle dashed around the room, searching for something heavy. She needed to break the thick glass in the window, but everything Katie owned was stamped with "Fisher-Price" and was made from light plastic.

Then it would have to be her fists, she decided.

Leaping onto the bed, she looked over her shoulder. "Katie! We're going out the win..." she stopped—struck speechless by the sight of the door. The black smoke of the creature was slipping around the edges of it as if searching for a way in. Gayle still felt in charge of her emotions, even if just barely, but Katie was in a terrible state and let out a terrific high-pitched wail of hopeless fear.

The room was starting to turn bitterly cold and Gayle jumped down and grabbed Katie who was almost literally freezing in place. The little girl was simultaneously stiff with fright and shivering with the sudden cold. Gayle put her on the bed—as if the extra two feet would make any difference—and went to the window.

She wasn't fooling herself anymore; the drop from the window was a good twenty feet and the likelihood of impaling herself on one of the bushes below was

very great, yet the alternative was far worse. There was no more time for hesitation or indecision and she hauled her right arm back to strike the glass with all her force, not realizing that her *radius*, one of the two slim bones in her forearm, was broken long before the strike.

The bone had fractured during her fall on the backstairs, and in her almost continuous state of terror, she had barely felt the pain. Now, as her fist struck the glass, burning agony shrieked up her arm to her shoulder, and she gasped, unable to even scream. The pain was so great, her stomach rolled over; falling to her knees, she vomited over the side of the bed. The pain took over her senses and for a few moments, even her fear left her, but not her determination.

Staggering up, wobbling crazily on weak legs and a sinking mattress, she positioned herself to strike the glass again, but this time with her left hand. Gayle knew that if she broke her left hand it would be all over for them, and because of that she pulled her punch. The heavy glass vibrated briefly and that was all.

"Lord please!" she cried and punched again, this time she held nothing back. The window shattered as her hand went through it. Shards sliced her open, down the length of her wrist, and blood gushed out onto the broken glass scattered on the sheets. Heedless of the pain and the gory mess, Gayle started knocking out the remaining glass with the back of her hand.

Another scream from Katie caused her to look back—the door was fully engulfed in roiling black smoke. At the sight, Gayle's heart stopped and started in great spastic thumps. The creature was only seconds from coming full into the room.

Gayle was captivated by the unearthly sight. Despite the broken window, her pain, and the bleeding wound, and the fact that their chance at escape was practically nil, she couldn't look away—even when an outline of a face appeared in the smoke. Like the rest, the face was black and grey in color but was firm and distinct from the swirling madness around it. Gayle noticed it low down, about knee high and her eyes fixated on it as it slowly rose up the door. The face looked to be soundlessly screaming and it jerked back and forth, writhing in apparent pain.

It was Talitha.

Of that there was no doubt. A movement to the side caught Gayle's eye and she heard a small thump, but the face held her entire attention. When it neared the top of the door it collapsed, folding in on itself, and was sucked into the slim space between the door and the jam. Her mind reeled from the sight and she had trouble concentrating or even caring about what was happening around her. The creature was almost all the way through the door now and in its presence the fog she had experienced on the backstairs had returned and was now worse... much worse, because it was being directed right at Gayle.

5

Gayle's head felt heavy. She let it hang low on her neck, so that her face was to the carpet and she could see questing black tendrils of the smoke. They had the same symmetry as miniature tornados, spinning outward from the great mass of the creature forcing its way through the door. One of the tendrils was nearing the

bed and swirled around the toes of a tiny little foot. The foot was pink and looked clean, as though it had been recently bathed. Gayle saw the toenails had been painted lavender; it reminded her of Katie's little foot.

The smoke would cover that foot in moments and there was nothing Gayle could do about it; her mind was no longer her own. It belonged to the demon. The thing had her mind and was running through it, casually like a man skimming a magazine in a dentist's office. It paused here and there, looking for something interesting, looking for pain, looking for something naughty, looking for sin...

Without explanation, the demon abruptly turned its gaze away from her and her mind snapped back to functioning normally with a jarring suddenness. In a flash, she finally recognized that it was Katie lying on the carpet, and it was her foot that the fingers of smoke were reaching out for. The girl looked as if she was fast asleep and Gayle could only hope that she had fainted before seeing the face of her sister in the smoke.

Gayle leapt down from the bed and made to scoop up the little girl, but stabbing pain ran up her broken right arm. It was like fire. A gasp escaped her throat at the intensity of it, yet she tried again but the arm was utterly useless, unable to grip anything.

Using her left hand, she dragged Katie to the furthest corner of the room away from the door. The door was no longer visible beneath the smoke. Even though the demon had looked away, the smoke of its body continued to pour into the room and now it was everywhere; it curled up the walls, and ran through the shag of the yellow carpet like snakes through a cornfield.

Seeing this, Gayle desperately tried to pick up the little girl with her one good hand, but only had the strength to yank her in an ugly fashion onto the bed. Gayle jumped up as well as the tendrils now covered the floor in darkness and in growing horror she saw that soon they would begin climbing up the bedposts as well.

The window over the bed, which had the appearance of a mouth filled with sharp bloody teeth, was her last chance and she began yanking and pulling poor Katie up to the sill. However, without being able to use her right arm, it was impossible.

Filled with a mixture of sick dread and despair, Gayle had a sudden wish that she could faint too and lay down alongside her daughter. It looked so nice and peaceful. She wished that she could just lay her head down and dream the nightmare away. But that was not to be and there was only one thing left to do. Gayle bent and gave Katie a kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

With that, she got up and turned to fight the demon in any way she could. Yet even as she turned to face the creature, her heart leapt in excitement; the black smoke was receding, sucking itself back through the doorframe.

It was leaving.

Why or how she didn't know, but her spirits rose at the sight and for the first time that night she felt they had a chance. However, Katie would have to be awake if they were to take advantage of the opportunity. Gayle's eyes darted around the room and came to rest on a half-filled glass of water next to the bed.

"Mommy, can I have a glass of water? On-a-cuz I'm so thirsty." Katie had said days and days ago in another lifetime or so it felt to Gayle—though in fact it had just been a couple of hours ago at bedtime.

"You won't drink it, you never do." Gayle was tired and wanted to read her own book. She had listened to Katie read her books on baby animals for the past hour; the little girl was mad about baby animals.

"I will this time, I promise. I'm sure I'm thirsty, Mommy."

"Not tonight, dear. I'm bushed. You know, if you ever drank any of it I would..."

"I'll get you some water, Katie-bunny." William stood in the doorway, nearly filling it with his broad shoulders.

He had fetched the water and tickled his girl and now the water sat on the bedside table, untouched since William put it there. Gayle grabbed it and poured the contents slowly over Katie's face and to her delight, the girl began to splutter and look about in surprise.

They had a chance!

It was very difficult, but Gayle pulled her daughter to her feet. The little girl blinked in a stuporous daze, wobbled a moment and then put her hand out to the wall to steady herself, but just as suddenly she snatched it back and the confusion in her eyes was replaced in a flash, first by understanding and then by fear. Quickly the fear in Katie's eyes began to turn to panic.

"Katie! Listen to me. We got to get out of here. I need you to..." Gayle was just about to tell her how they were going to jump out of the window, when she heard a voice from far away. It was more than a voice, it was a bellow and one she knew.

"Gayle! Katie! Get out of the house! Now's your chance! Run!"

"Daddy!" Katie cried, fully awake now, relief showing plain on her face.

Hope flared and expanded in Gayle's chest. They really could make it. William was here, and if he said to run, she was going to run.

"Katie, I can't carry you. You're going to have to run for the front door, and don't look back!" Her complete faith in her husband was on display then. Without bothering to look through the keyhole, she threw open the door and charged out of the room pulling Katie after her.

The end of the hall near the landing was a deep, deep black. *It* was down there, and Gayle felt fantastically exposed with nothing but thirty feet of empty hallway between them. Ignoring this, she yanked Katie to the stairs and watched as her little feet nimbly sped down them.

Gayle stood there, out in the open waiting until her daughter reached safety. Seconds later she almost laughed with happiness; they were going to make it outside for sure. *It* was now on the backstairs heading down and she would only have to wait a few more seconds until Katie made it all the way down. Looking back at Katie, she saw the tiny blonde girl was only three steps from the bottom and Gayle thought in giddy triumph: 'Close enough!'

She reached out her bloody left hand, gripped the rail and started down as fast as she could, feeling almost joyous at the idea of getting out of the house. Only Gayle had no idea what she was dealing with.

The demon had not finished with Talitha before she was taken from the house and now the little girl was almost to the front door... almost out of its reach, as well. The demon was angry. It had a horrendous, hideous anger, and when it

looked upon Gayle from the backstairs, she felt the fury of it pass through her and around her. Her mind went instantly numb and a great static filled her ears. She pitched forward onto the railing and then crumpled down a few stairs.

For seconds there was no sensation but the static in Gayle's mind and then she heard Katie's voice screaming up at her. The words were indistinct but the fear in her voice was starting to register.

A distant part of Gayle's brain ordered her to get up and get moving and with each passing second her body started to respond but it was not happening fast enough. Gayle began to weakly push herself with her bleeding left arm and she slid down a couple of stairs in hard jerking thumps. That was all the energy she had and she came to a stop midway down and lay looking back up the stairs. The hallway above slowly filled with an intense blackness.

She knew she should move but the demon's presence was all about her, and she felt her mind being ravaged. Memories that had been distant and vague came back crystal clear, but they were distorted and spun to show her in the worst possible way. Seeing them in her mind's eye Gayle began to hate herself. It became so bad that had she a knife on hand she would've slit her own throat.

Closer the demon came and the hate grew—she was evil—horribly so and it was no wonder her family had all left her to the fate that she so obviously deserved.

Even as the self-loathing erupted through her, William suddenly appeared standing over her and she remembered how poor of a wife she had been to him: how she had denied him sexually and had practically driven him from their bed; how she had harped and nagged at him; how she had made him feel that he was useless and pathetic, less than a man.

She saw his hands reach down to her and his face was set in anger. He would kill her. That was good. Dying by his hands was the way it should be. Yet for some reason he didn't kill her. Instead, she felt a strange weightlessness as she unexpectedly flew into the air. She ended up on one of his broad shoulders, face down, staring at the back of his legs, carried like a sack of potatoes.

Then with a snap the demon was gone from her mind.

She felt a great rush as her brain took in everything around her with fantastic clarity. She knew the endless dull ache of her broken right forearm and the painful numbness of her bare toes. She felt the blood rushing to her head and pouring in a steady stream down her left wrist. Gayle heard the cries of Katie at the front door and the steady breathing of her husband.

The rush of awareness was then followed by a wave of exhaustion so complete that she was content to hang over William's shoulder, watching her blood trickle on the stairs leaving a long red trail. Vaguely, she wondered if she was bleeding to death... and couldn't decide if she cared.

They were on the last stair when William stumbled.

He lurched to the right, catching himself from falling by holding onto the archway in the foyer. Gayle felt the presence of the demon, it wasn't focused on her, but on her husband.

William's body went rigid beneath the things gaze. His fingernails on the wall of the foyer made a long drawn out *SSSCRRRIITCHH!* His left arm, the arm holding Gayle to his shoulder, began to squeeze the back of her legs with such force that she cried out in pain. She pushed up with her good arm, trying to adjust her legs,

to relieve the pressure he was exerting on the bone in her left thigh. As she did, she caught sight of the staircase, barely ten feet away and saw it was as black as midnight.

Her emotions were shattered, but she knew she wanted to live, and she started to spank William on the backside to try to get him to move. Her weakened state made it an act of futility, and she could do little but hit him pathetically and watch as the blackness drew closer and closer.

This was it, William's shaking had become extreme, and his head started to whip back and forth against her leg. Gayle's only hope was that he would collapse quickly and that she would have the strength to pull him from the house, but until then she was a virtual prisoner in his arms.

"No!" he yelled out with hard savagery in his voice and instead of his legs buckling under him, he started moving forward slowly as if wading through deep water. Then a great blast of hot air washed over Gayle as he stepped out into the night. The heat was tremendous compared to the frigid temperatures of the house and it revved up her lethargy so that she felt herself slip in and out of consciousness. She was carried to the back of the house and dumped roughly on the grass of the golf course.

"Are you ok?" William's face was ashen and grey and his bleary eyes couldn't seem to focus on anything but kept wandering about.

"Talitha..." she said weakly.

He looked just to the side of Gayle and his eyes filled with tears. "I know, but there's still a chance."

A chance?

"She's alive?" It seemed impossible. Gayle turned her head slowly, looking to where William's eyes had rested and saw her two eldest children laid out in the grass. They were still and appeared pale as death. Gayle tried to stand but lacked the strength, so she crawled to her children and cried over them.

When Willy J opened his eyes briefly, her breath came out in a sharp gasp. She had assumed he was dead. In joy she kissed him, but his eyes soon rolled up in his head and he looked as though he had fainted. She wished that Talitha would open her eyes, but her beautiful daughter felt stone cold and Gayle thought her eyes would be closed forever. The thought caused her great pain and she went to kiss her baby, but drew back at once, repulsed by the feel. It reminded Gayle of the demon and she involuntarily looked up at the big house and was astounded at how close they were to it.

They were right across the street and it loomed over them in the dark. The demon was in there, somewhere and all it had to do was cross fifteen feet of pavement to get at them. With a rush of fear, she attempted to get up again, but it was a failure. Her one 'good' arm, the one with the terrific gash, shook with the effort to push herself up and she collapsed back down. Blearily, she looked around for William, but he was gone. Only Katie was nearby—she stood with her back to Gayle in her once-pink pajamas, which were now maroon with drying blood.

"Katie? Katie? Where's..."

"Not now, Mommy," Katie asserted with a tone of command.

This perked Gayle up the slightest bit. "Where's daddy? Katie? Katie?" The little girl kept her back to her mom and refused to answer at first, "Katie..."

"Stop it, Mommy! I'm on guard duty on-a-cuz of the monster! Daddy went to get help, sheesh!"

Gayle lay back, looking at the night sky, feeling foolish relief at being watched over by a skinny six-year-old. The moon seemed very bright and she closed her eyes.

She awoke sometime later and the light of the moon was doused by flashing red and white lights. Fear gripped her, she knew these lights from somewhere, and she struggled to get up, but a strange man gently pushed her down. The lights hurt her eyes more than the moon had and she closed them.

6

It seemed only a moment later before she opened her eyes again and saw that she had been moved to a hospital room. *That was fast*, she thought to herself. She tried to get up, but her right arm ached and throbbed and was too stiff to bend.

She was amazed to see it in a fresh white cast and she stared at it as if she had never seen such a thing before. Her left arm was bandaged too, and her mind was all confusion and she wondered how long she had been in the room.

Looking about, the first thing she saw was a blonde girl sleeping in a chair, curled up like a cat and Gayle didn't know who she was. The chair was pulled up to the bed next to Gayle's and her son was in the bed. He appeared to be sleeping and other than a bandage on his right hand, he seemed healthy. Relief flooded through her at the sight of him. The only other bed in the room held her darling Katie and she too, looked to be sleeping. Gayle stared long at the little girl trying to figure out where she had been injured, yet she seemed unblemished and perfect.

How could that be so? Gayle distinctly remembered seeing Katie covered in blood, almost from head to toe.

If Katie was all right, maybe that meant Talitha was ok too. For a second she allowed foolish hope to grow in her, but then she remembered Talitha's face in the smoke and the touch of her terribly cold body—the hope died in her. Great sadness took its place. Gayle turned toward the window and the sun shone through, streaming full on her face.

She looked into the sun letting it blind her and she cried quietly for a long time.

Warm soft fingers took her bandaged left hand and held it in a comforting way. The blonde girl in the chair had woken. Gayle realized the girl was Willy J's old girlfriend, Lisa. She was wearing an old ratty grey sweat suit, her face was pale and without any makeup, her hair was a wilderness of blond tangles, and her eyes were puffy, red-rimmed, and leaking tears.

And she was beautiful; Gayle saw it then for the first time. She wanted to smile at Lisa but her sorrow and tears wouldn't allow it and she simply held the girl's hand. Lisa bent and planted a kiss on her cheek, her tears fell and mingled with Gayle's, and the two stayed that way for a long time, crying in near silence.

A nurse came in to check on them, and then a long series of nurses and orderlies came, each asking the same questions and each with the same intense curious look on their faces.

The island was a small, close community and having an entire family brought into the emergency room at the same time, was sure to be a seven-day wonder. The gossip mill must have been going into overdrive, but Gayle didn't have the strength to care. She wanted desperately to ask them about Talitha, but was so afraid of the answer that she couldn't bring herself to do it. However, the longer she went without asking, the greater her anxiety became.

At some point, Katie came and cuddled up to her mother. She looked pallid, and quickly fell back to sleep with her thumb lodged in her mouth. Willy J was also up; moving about and there was restless energy to him. He kept pacing, stretching, and rubbing his arms as if they were cold. His face was set in stony mask of grim determination that was only broken by a smile for Lisa. She had gone to him when he stirred and they had kissed passionately. So much so, that Gayle became embarrassed and turned away. She stared into the sun, long after they separated.

No one spoke much and the room filled with an awkward silence. They had apparently been in the hospital for the last eight hours, and now they were all waiting for something to occur, something that would explain the events of the previous night. They also waited for news of Talitha. The subject seemed to be taboo, with no one mentioning her at all.

The only one who seemed unafraid to talk was Lisa, who doted on all of them, doing whatever was asked of her, and she bustled about, doing the job of two nurses. She didn't jabber on to fill the silences, but spoke respectfully and only when necessary. Though it was clear she wanted to, she asked no questions, and this above all else impressed Gayle.

Finally a little after 8am, William strode into the room followed by a doctor in blue scrubs and a uniformed Coast Guard officer. Her husband looked haggard and seemed tired to the point of exhaustion. Gayle didn't think he had slept at all, and marveled how he was able to keep going. He had been under the gaze of the demon just as she had and it had left her drained beyond anything she had ever felt before. Ignoring the two men who had come into the room with him, William went to each family member, including Lisa, and kissed them warmly.

"Are you ok?" he asked Gayle quietly. She knew the bad news was coming and she tried to steel herself for it, but her heart began melting, pouring into stomach, making her feel sick in her anxiety.

"Yes, how's Talitha?" Just asking was a great strain on her and the one second wait for the answer felt like it aged her a year.

"She... she's in a coma. I'm so sorry, Honey." He wiped away tears that hadn't been there a moment ago. "She's not doing well. They can't seem to get her body temperature back to normal. I..." he trailed off in uncertainty.

The doctor walked forward and picking up a chart from her bedside, gave it a quick scan. "I'm Dr Thielsen. Before we get to your daughter, how are you feeling? Are you in much pain?"

"I'm fine," she lied. "What's wrong with Talitha? Tell me."

"I will, I promise. But first, wiggle your fingers... good... now the other hand. Now look up plea..."

"I'm fine, Doctor. Please tell me, will she be ok?"

"Talitha has had some sort of shock to her system. It's nothing I've ever seen before and it's very strange. We thought at first she was suffering from hypothermia, but she has resisted all of our attempts at active warming and what's worse is that her core temperature is slowly dropping. The cause of both the coma and the thermoregulation problem are still a mystery and I was hoping you could shed some light on it."

"Me? I—I don't know."

A demon did it! It was the demon, but how do you say that? How on earth could she explain a monster in the full rational light of day?

Thielsen continued, "I've already asked your husband these questions, but I need to be thorough. Did Talitha ever faint or lose consciousness before last night?"

"No," she replied and then panicked at her answer. Maybe she had passed out when Gayle wasn't looking, or when she had been out shopping.

"Did she ever complain about being too hot or too cold, when everyone else was fine?"

"No," she answered, but then remembered there was a time at Jones beach: Talitha had said it was really hot, but Gayle hadn't thought so. She was about to tell the doctor this, but he had moved on to another question. This he did repeatedly. He was going too fast for her and right when she thought she knew the correct answer to his last question, he was on to the next one. It got worse when he started asking about different diseases Talitha might have.

"Did she have Juvenile Diabetes?"

"No, but she liked Kool-Aid, and that's all about sugar, right?"

"Sort of. What about Muscular Dystrophy?"

"No. She did like to read a lot and she wasn't very active, couldn't that mean..." This went on and on. Gayle remembered that Talitha had the Chicken Pox once, and this was the only thing she knew for certain that Talitha had ever suffered from. However, the doctor never asked about it and Gayle had to suppress a weird need to mention it. Her head began to thump badly.

Finally, the doctor stopped with the questions. He looked thoughtful. "I'm sorry I had to put you through all of that, but I needed to rule out the obvious. You see, normally a thermoregulation problem stems from brain trauma, or as a side effect from a disease, but her brain seems perfectly healthy. We have run every test I can think of, but her disorder seems to fall outside of the known literature. There is some blood work that is pending and we'll know soon enough anyway, but do any of you know if she was taking any illegal drugs?"

"No, she's perfectly clean," Willy J answered. His face was a blank screen. It looked as though, he thought this was happening to someone else and he was only watching it. Gayle didn't know what to think. She felt behind and lost in the conversation and worse, there was something building up in her and she was afraid that she might just explode at any minute.

"That's what I was worried about." The doctor gave a sharp glance in William's direction. "I would like to have her transferred to Johns Hopkins. They'll be able to do more for her there and I think it would be in her best interest."

Having experienced the horror of the demon, Gayle hadn't been relieved at hearing that Talitha was in a coma, and knew that it was the fiend keeping her

alive in that condition. The thought made her anxiety bloom. "What would they do differently?" she asked.

"Oh, there are a lot more tests they can run at their facilities that I don't have access to here. This is a very small hospital after all."

"More tests?" Gayle felt a silly desire to tell him that Talitha was a straight-A student, but pushed the statement down deep. It could only go so deep however, since her head felt like a balloon on the verge of popping.

"Yes, at a minimum, we need to do more tests on her blood and her cerebral spinal fluids. There are also tests that..." the doctor continued on, telling her about all of the different tests they could run. He spoke calmly, soothingly. However, the term *Cerebral Spinal Fluids* had stuck in Gayle mind and swirled around it, so that she failed to hear anything else.

"Cerebral spinal fluids," the doctor said in a voice that commiserated with her pain.

"Uh-huh," Gayle replied.

"Cerebral Spinal Fluids." His words, full of understanding.

"Uh-huh," Gayle said.

"Mrs. Jern?"

He had clearly said something that demanded more than an "uh-huh" answer.

She glanced about and everyone looked at her with blame in their eyes, or perhaps they weren't, she didn't know anymore. She was losing it. Her ability to reason and think rationally began to slip away from her. She felt childish and needy, and recognized in a distant manner that she was becoming hysterical.

Trying to focus, she asked, "Uh... why? Why are you doing all these tests?"

The doctor looked around in amazement, but when he failed to see matching looks of incredulity, he explained, "So we can find what's wrong your daughter. I have to tell you upfront, I don't hold out much hope, especially with the lack of electrical activity in her brain. But, there's still a chance. We need to run these tests to pinpoint the exact cause of the coma, so then we might be able to formulate a treatment plan for her."

The exact cause was a damned demon!

Rage exploded in Gayle and she wanted to scream the simple explanation in his face. She hated the doctor and his stupid blue pajamas and all his useless tests. The thread of her sanity was unraveling quickly and deep down she *wanted* it to unravel—all the way. If it did, she could sleep without care and not feel the tremendous pain over what was happening to Talitha. If it unraveled she could die too, and that would be the end, and she wanted that. But her mind wouldn't unravel and she was stuck somewhere in the middle between sanity and insanity, and that was far worse than either.

What she did know for certain was that there was going to be no treatment plan. Modern medicine wouldn't be able to stop the demon or end her daughter's tremendous pain.

"No!" The word was firm, bordering on harshness. "She'll stay here with me. And there will be no more needles or cutting her or any of that worthless crap!" Her body broke down crying, her chest heaving, and her breath hitching badly. William hugged her tightly and when she calmed a bit she asked, "How much... how much time does she have?"

The doctor was slow to respond. "How much time? We don't even know what's wrong yet. I've been searching through the literature trying to find anything that resembles this, but nothing has come up. I wish I could tell you that..."

Breaking in Gayle demanded, "How much time?"

"Like I said, there's no way to know, but her respirations were so dangerously low that we had to put her on a ventilator. If we were to take her off, it could be minutes."

Was it sane or insane to wish your daughter dead? Was it a sin? Was it moral? The image of Talitha's screaming face slid smoothly into Gayle's mind, and her reasoning, unbalanced already, became precarious.

"She's in pain. Talitha's in pain, I know it... you know it too, William. We can't k-keep her like this. We have to take her off the ventilator."

The Commander looked down at the overly clean floors and with a string of barely perceptible nods of his head, he conveyed his reluctant agreement.

"Well... this isn't..." The doctor seemed at a complete loss at the request. "That's your choice of course. And I wish I could give you more hope. But before we do this..."

"Not yet! Wait...wait!" Gayle screamed interrupting him; her mind slipped away from her then. The hysteria had been lurking just below the surface, and now it rose up like a great tentacled beast. The doctor was going to kill her daughter, just like that. "Let me get ready! I have to get ready! William! Stop him! Don't touch me! Get off me!" Shrieking, she struggle to rise, but her husband held her down gently. "I'm not ready! You got to stop him William; he's going to kill Talitha!"

Katie started to cry with little whimpering noises.

"Mrs. Jern. Mrs. Jern, we won't do anything until you're ready."

"William, damn it! Let me up! I'm not ready for my baby to die! Stop him...Willy J! Willy J, you stop him right now! I'm your mother and you had better stop him right now or you are in big trouble! Do you hear me!" Her screams shook the glass in the windows. Then just as suddenly as the madness took her, it left, leaving her sobbing, "Willy J, please, please."

Will looked at Dr Thielsen sheepishly and with tears in his eyes, placed his bandaged hand on the doctor's shoulder and said in a choked whisper, "I... I got him, Mom. You don't have to worry. I won't let him do anything to Talitha."

She stopped struggling and lay back weeping, "I'm sorry Doctor Thielsen. I know you won't hurt her... I just..." Whatever she was going to say was lost in her tears. She didn't know if she could do this terrible thing: kill her own daughter. But Talitha was trapped and in such pain! Gayle went back and forth with the choice and cried a very long time as the others stood about in a hard silence. She felt embarrassed at her outburst but she figured that going slightly insane might have been the sanest thing to do, under the circumstances.

Dr Thielsen looked uncomfortable. "If I had better news I think I'd try to talk you out of this. But Talitha's condition is grave and realistically speaking I can't offer much hope. At best we're looking at a deeply embedded tumor in the hypothalamus—a tricky spot under the best of conditions. And with her now so far gone...but there's always hope. Please keep that in mind." The doctor then left them, supposedly to ponder on their decision.

"Do you want me on guard duty on Tal, Mommy?" Katie asked with great seriousness. Large, fat tears hung on her eyelashes defying gravity as only a little girl's tears can. She had an unbelievably hard look to her eyes and Gayle knew Talitha would be safe with her little sister watching over her. Seeing the little girl's fierce love caused her to blubber some more and she kissed Katie all over her face. The mother in her decided that if for any other reason, she'd try to hold it together for Katie.

"I love you, Mommy, but I think you put boogers and snots on me." Katie wiped away the sticky mess on her cheeks.

"Sorry about the boogers, Katie-bunny. I think I want Willy J to stand guard over Talitha." She turned to her son. "Can you do that for me? And can you, maybe hold her hand... if it doesn't, you know." Thinking about Talitha's cold touch and how it had sucked at her life sent a shiver down her back.

Will wiped away his tears and nodded. He was just about to leave the room when the officer, who had been standing discreetly back, spoke for the first time, "I'm sorry, but I can't let anyone leave until I have interviewed each of you."

Gayle's anxiety, hysteria and sadness, turned into a nasty icy anger in a second. "William, who is this *person* and why does he think he can order us about?"

Chapter 9

The Death of William. June 5th 1980

1

The night passed in painful slowness and surprising speed.

William's exhaustion felt like a thick, heavy coat, one of those huge fur ones that the men would wear in the old timey pictures. His exhaustion weighed him down as well as slowed him down and basically made his waking life miserable. However in sleep that same coat was irresistible, warm, and comforting. It was torture to stay awake and when he did, time seemed to stand still, but if he ever closed his eyes, an hour would be gone in a snap. He tried to sit with each of his family members, just in case they would wake, but he did little more than blink stupidly, yawn cavernously, and snore loudly.

Near 8am the nightshift doctor shook him awake and gave him an update. Though Talitha wasn't doing well, Gayle had finally awakened, and the doctor and he went to her room to see her. William was so out of it mentally that he didn't notice the Coast Guard warrant officer who followed him into the room. He was completely unaware of the man's presence until he asked Will to stay for questioning.

"My name is Chief Warrant Officer Jeffery Ingstrom," he paused and grimaced slightly at having to do his duty under such sad circumstances. "I'm with the Coast Guard Investigative Services, and I'm the officer in charge of the

investigation concerning the events at your home last night. As such, Mrs. Jern, I have to get a brief statement from everyone involved." Ingstrom was normally a neat man, but it was obvious he'd been working throughout the night and his uniform looked slightly disheveled.

In his exhausted state, William hadn't given the idea of an investigation any thought, and he became suddenly nervous.

"Do you mind if I go first, Jeff?" William asked, glad that Ingstrom headed up the inquiry. He was a good man and unfortunately, one of the few who were in the Investigative Services. Good man or not there was a danger here that his family might not be aware of. It was unlikely that the military was going to believe a lot of talk about a demon, especially without substantial proof and he wanted to find out first what Ingstrom or his men might have seen before letting loose with the truth. "Can you first tell me if the *person* who did this was still in the house when you arrived?" he asked, giving special emphasis on the word *person* and shooting Gayle a meaningful look.

"There was no one in the home, sorry Commander. We scoured it from top to bottom and have had patrols everywhere looking for anyone acting in a suspicious manner. That's the main reason I'm here Mrs. Jern, I need a description of the person. Did you get a good look at him?"

Gayle opened her mouth, seeming on the verge of saying something, when William butted in: "It was dark in the house and the *person* looked to be dressed up all in black. I would guess at least six feet tall, but it was hard to figure his weight because of the cape or whatever it was that he wore."

Lisa spoke up suddenly, "Do you mind if I go see Talitha? I wasn't at the house last night and I'm just here visiting... and Mrs. Jern, I'll hold her hand and I won't let anything happen to her."

"Please do, Lisa. Hold her as long... as long as you are comfortable. Thank you." Gayle's icy look had evaporated and her eyes held warm gratitude for the girl. "That is of course, if it's ok with Officer Ingstrom."

"Certainly you can, I'm so sorry." Ingstrom nodded to Lisa, who gave both Will and his mother a quick kiss before she slipped from the room. The investigator looked back at William. "A cape? That's extremely odd. Were you able to see his face at all? Was he white, black..."

"He didn't have a face," Katie interrupted without emotion. "There was a hole where it should've been." She was still snuggled up to her mom, covered very nearly completely in light blue hospital blankets. "That was the scariest part... it didn't have a face."

Here we go, William thought.

"Hi there. What's your name?" Ingstrom asked gently.

Gayle glanced at her husband and he noted the worry in her eyes, but William gave her a short nod, which implied, *let Katie talk.*

"Katherine Jern... but it wasn't a man... it was a monster. It was black and smoky and scary."

"Will you tell me what happened?" Ingstrom said. "Starting with where you were when all this began. Were you asleep?"

"Yeah, only I don't know what woke me up... the house I think. There were weird noises, and it got colder and I had a real bad dream. And... and I was ascaresd."

"What did you do when you got scared? Did you go look for your mommy or daddy?"

"No. I hid under the bed," Katie said without any emotion. She stared at the bandaged arm of her mother as she spoke. "I was afraid to leave it...and there was something out in the hall. And... and my mommy came in and we were gonna run, but we got trapped with no place to go."

"So what happened after your mommy came in?"

"We were ascaresd to go into the hallway on-a-cuz of the monster and..." She stopped speaking in mid-sentence and sat with her mouth open, shaking her head gently back and forth.

"A monster? Did you see it in the hallway?" Ingstrom's relaxed and unforced manner suggested he was used to dealing with children.

"Yeah after... after I saw... I saw..." Again she stopped talking and Gayle hugged her daughter with her non-broken arm.

"I think she has answered enough questions, William," Gayle said. "What more is there to say?"

"Mrs. Jern, I have to ask just a couple more questions. If I don't, I know my C.O. will have me come back again in an hour and it's best to get it over with." Ingstrom was very reasonable and he had a kind face.

Gayle, won over by his logic and kind approach, nodded.

Ingstrom squatted down next the bed so he was below her level. "Just a few more questions. Katie, was the monster a person...someone you know?"

"No... huh... huh... huh," her breath began hitching roughly in her chest, but her eyes were still clear and free of tears. "It was a... a mon... monster. It was scary and mean and nasty and all covered in black."

"It was dark in the hallway, and it was all in black. Did you have trouble seeing it?" Ingstrom asked.

"Yeah," she replied. Suddenly her breathing cleared up entirely and her voice grew clear, "It was big and black and it was hard to see into it... but I didn't want to see it neither... it was too scary."

"Katie, where was your daddy when you were trapped in your bedroom?"

Katie stared far away. "I don't know," she answered in a small voice.

Warrant officer Ingstrom glanced briefly at William and then back to Katie, suddenly looked sad. "Did you ever see your daddy at the same time as you saw the monster?"

Katie seemed almost to be dreaming with her eyes open. "Yes. He rescued us. He ran up to the monster and I thought he was going to fight it and I was so afraid for him. But he picked up mommy...and brought her outside." She stared far away for a few seconds, remembering, and then she snapped back to the present. "You were very brave, Daddy. What is a coma and what's wrong with Tal? What did the doctor mean by thermo... irrigation? What's that mean?"

"Katie..." William started to say, but Katie began to cry.

"Is Tal going to die? Why? Why is she going to die? I don't want her to leave. I want her to stay with me! I'm her best friend, and there're no kids in heaven, only

old people and she'll be so lonely without me. And I'll be lonely without her." Katie cried with true sorrow.

This wasn't a cry over a broken toy or a lost kite or stubbed toe. It was a soul-rending cry that pained William deeply to see and to hear. Soon all of the Jerns were weeping quietly. After a few minutes, Katie began to settle down and William said, "Gayle, are you strong enough to go see Talitha?"

"I have to be," she responded still holding her youngest.

"Commander, I have to apologize for the last question, but... it happens more than you think."

Confused, Gayle asked, "What happens? Monst... I mean attacks here on the island?"

William hung his head and depression started to settle on his weary face. "No," he told her. "He's talking about domestic abuse."

"Oh yeah, it's mostly what I investigate these days." Ingstrom shook his head sadly. "Can I have you tell me what happened from your point of view?" he asked Gayle.

She hadn't got past the idea of abuse. "But he has never hurt any of us! Look at him... if he hit me, I would break in half! This is preposterous." Gayle appeared bewildered at the thought. Ingstrom only looked gloomier.

"Gayle, the victims of abuse tend to deny what has happened and they will often defend their abuser." William added dejectedly. "I think we should tell our version of what happened and know the truth is on our side."

She pursed her lips tightly for a few seconds and then spoke quickly and without emotion. Her story was over in less than a minute and it was obvious she had received all of William's signals; she didn't mention the demon once. Without the demon in her story, it came out sounding suspicious, and Ingstrom looked sharply at Gayle. She didn't seem to care and exhaustion pulled down on her eyelids.

"Do you know where your husband was last night," the Investigator asked her.

"No..."

"I was out looking for my son who was past his curfew," William spoke up defensively.

"Did you find him?"

William shook his head. Even the barest suggestion of abuse was sending him deeper into despair.

"Do you have guns or other weapons in the house?"

William immediately thought of his useless ceremonial dress sword, but Gayle said, "Just some steak knives in the kitchen."

"Ok, I think those are all my questions for you, Mrs. Jern." Ingstrom then turned to Will. "Did you see what happened to your sister?"

"No... when I came home, I saw Talitha on the second-floor landing... unconscious. I looked down the hall and I saw the... you know, the man. So I grabbed her and went to run away but I fell down the stairs instead. My dad came up from outside and helped us out of the house."

"Is that when you yelled for your wife to leave?" Ingstrom asked William.

"Yes... Will told me they were trapped and... and I heard it coming so I figured it was their best chance."

Ingstrom looked thoughtful for a few moments. "Have any of you made enemies? Gotten into any fights? Have you had to discipline anyone recently, Commander?" The answer was no to all the questions. After a minute of the Jerns looking back and forth at each other with nothing but shrugs, the investigator puffed his cheeks and blew out long and slow. "There isn't much to go on, I'm afraid. There were almost no clues of any sort at the house. Maybe we'll get lucky with the fingerprints we took."

This was greeted with stony-faced silence from the family but Ingstrom seemed to just take it as a sign of exhaustion. "Now Commander, I want you to know that I personally don't see evidence of abuse here... however... it is my duty to follow up with the doctor to make sure he believes your injuries match up with the events as you described them. It'll just be a few minutes, can you all wait here?"

They were silent until he left. "Oh my God! Why is this happening to us?" Gayle threw herself back onto her pillow. She seemed grief stricken as well as panic stricken simultaneously. "What did we do to deserve this? I try to be a good person..."

William began a frantic pacing in the room. "This is my fault, Gayle. I should've been home. And the demon... I knew it last night..."

"Huh? How? What? Where were you last night?" she hissed, her brows coming down hard. "I needed you! It was terrible being trapped in that room and Tal..." She trailed off looking down at her bed but seeing nothing.

He went to her and kissed both her and Katie. "I'm so sorry. If I knew what was going to happen, I would've never left. I would've got everyone out of the house right away."

"Right away? What do you mean? Do you know what caused it, did you see it?"

"No, I just knew it on a gut level. I woke up a little after eleven and I just felt that something was wrong. I tried to go back to sleep but I was anxious or worried."

"About what?" she asked.

"The demon. I could feel the demon. I'd seen it before when we..."

Gayle's eyes bulged. "You what? You saw the demon before? Why didn't you tell me? What were you thinking?" Her angry hissing came back but louder.

He told them about the brief vision of the demon in the flash of the burned out bulb, the odd feelings he had experienced in the boiler room, and even about the repairman, and the Greek painter.

"Then it's my fault too!" Katie cried. "I scared the painter real bad and called him names. Maybe he sicced the monster on us."

"No Katie, something else happened last night. It wasn't you," William said reassuringly, "Last night that creepy feeling was back and much stronger. I was afraid and nervous, so I went to check on everyone, but Will wasn't home. I had this need to be together, as a family. I woke up Talitha to ask her where you might be, Will... what's wrong?"

Will appeared in absolute misery. "I... uhhh! If I had been at home instead of..."

"Wait! You can't blame yourself in any way Willy J, none of us can," Gayle soothed. "How could any of you know what was going to happen?" After a pause she asked, "So, where were you?"

Will had his head in his hands and spoke so softly that they almost couldn't hear him, "I was with Lisa. We got back together last night."

"You did?" William said. "That's good. But Talitha told me which bench you two like to hang out at and you weren't there."

"We were uh, somewhere else."

"Wh..." William stopped, realizing then not where they were, but what they were doing. "Oh... well. Then that's why I missed you I guess."

Gayle eyes went wide, stunned by the unspoken news. Will hung his head, refusing to look up. There was an awkward silence that William felt needed to be filled, "Either way, I ran down to that bench as fast as I could and when I saw you weren't there, I took the sea wall back, hoping you had gone that way. However, you weren't there either and my need to get back was almost desperate. I knew something bad was going to happen, so I sprinted home as fast as I could." He paused and stared at the black and white tile pattern of the hospital floor.

"The house...when I got back, it was like it wasn't a house at all. A house is for the living, but last night it was a tomb. Did you feel it? How it felt hollow and dead inside?" Both Gayle and Will were nodding and staring off into space. William, overcome by his exhaustion, sat down in the chair between the two beds. "I heard a commotion on the backstairs, and it was you Will. There you were with Talitha lying on top of you and she was so pale-looking that I thought..." his chest became thick and heavy and he suddenly had trouble breathing.

"Anyway, I felt it coming. It was moving down the hall on the second floor. I could feel it. So I picked up Talitha and you just laid there and I was starting to panic so I grabbed you too. I didn't know if you were still in the house," he said to Gayle. "I just knew that if you were still ali... I mean still upstairs that this was going to be your only chance to make a run for it. So I yelled... something." William stopped talking for a moment and looked out the window at the pretty June morning. He wasn't silent for long; he had an odd, almost what he considered a "girlish" need to talk about what happened to him the previous night.

He told them of the frantic, wild state he had experienced. How each second had seemed to be vitally important, and he had known that if he lost even one to indecision, that someone would die. He told them of the life-draining feeling he had when he held Talitha and how the heat of the night had almost caused him to faint as he carried her to grass. He talked about how he felt seeing the demon on the main stairs just above Gayle. He spoke about how being in the thing's presence filled his brain with a terrific buzzing noise, as if a thousand angry bees had been let lose in his skull. And he told them about charging up the stairs to Gayle, afraid for her life because of all the blood.

However, the one thing he refused to talk about was what happened when the demon invaded his mind. It had brought forth thoughts and memories that had been his and not his simultaneously. It had twisted these thoughts into dreadful perversions: His desire to save Talitha turned into a desire to save Talitha only for himself. So he could have her...sexually. He had pictured her naked, posing with sweet erotic innocence and he'd had to fight an internal battle to keep from being aroused. It was horrible. The demon seemed to be able to plant thoughts into his head and then draw them out again as if they were his own.

His thoughts of Gayle had been equally bad. As he stood in the doorway of the foyer, he had hated her with an intense passion. It had seemed to him that she was a burdensome fat cow who he desperately wanted to throw to the floor and be rid of forever. She felt like a useless ton of bricks on his shoulder, weighing him down, just as she had been weighing him down ever since they first met.

With the demon sweeping toward him, he hadn't been able to think of anything but how she was the reason he hadn't been assigned to a Cutter of his own. It had been all of her ridiculous whining about the sea that had held him back and undermined his ambitions. And then there was the fact that she got between him and Talitha. She was old, fat, and wrinkled; in bed she had the body, the energy, and the imagination of a walrus—while Talitha was a nubile hidden treasure, slim, perky, and tantalizing.

Even as those appalling memories ran through his mind, Gayle asked him, "How were you able to keep going when the demon looked at you? When it looked on me, it felt like a bomb had gone off in my head and my body just sort of collapsed, no longer under my control."

"I guess it was a little different for me," he replied lamely.

"It looked at me too, and you're right Mom, it did feel like an explosion," Will agreed quietly. "It was very quick, a second or two only. I... I... think it was trying to hurt me, or knock me out. I know it didn't want me in the house." Will told his story then and he told it in a dazed, lifeless voice. It didn't take very long, but still he looked worn out by the effort of telling it. "So now what do we do? How do we get Talitha back? How can we fight the..."

"We don't even try to fight it. It's too strong," William said feeling shamefully weak.

"What if we got the priest?" Will asked.

The image of chubby, slightly balding Father Alba came to mind and William shook his head. "The house blessing was a waste of time. I don't think Father Alba has any..." He wanted to say magic, but it seemed childish, "...power over this demon and I think it could kill the priest the second he walked in the door." There was a silence as they each sat back and considered ways to help Talitha, or ways to fight the demon. In seconds however, exhaustion overtook them and unbelievably they each slipped into a deep sleep. For an hour they lay as if dead to the world, undisturbed until William woke to the sound of whispers.

2

William sat up and looked blearily at the door where Doctor Thielsen and Warrant Officer Ingstrom were talking quietly. His brain seemed to have trouble putting together thoughts and for a long moment, he could do little but blink his weary eyes. Eventually, he sat up and checked the time and was surprised to see it was just a little after 10 a.m.

Ingstrom came in with the doctor right behind him, and found the family in varying stages of wakefulness. "I'm sorry to wake you, Commander Jern, but I have to get back to the house to wrap up our investigation there, and we still have to rule out the uh abuse, however the doctor left your wife's chart in here."

"Please by all means, Jeff. Come in Doctor." William replied as he stretched and yawned hugely.

The doctor went to Gayle's bed and started flipping through his notes. "I see multiple injuries to Mrs. Jern. The broken radius is consistent with a fall... the laceration to the left wrist is almost exactly what we see at least once a month from Coasties punching windows. There are no fading contusions, which are usually indicative of long-term abuse. Now the lacerations to the son's chest could be a sign, but I doubt it. Overall, I would conclude that this isn't a domestic abuse situation."

Ingstrom nodded his head, looking satisfied. "Commander, Mrs. Jern, I'm truly sorry this has happened to you and your family. I want to assure you we're going to do everything we can to find the person responsible for all of this and bring them to justice." He smiled fleetingly and left in a hurry to complete his work.

William and Gayle let out matching sighs of relief and then gave each other identical smiles—grim and tight.

Perhaps out of habit, Doctor Thielsen began examining them. He started with Will and then moved on to Gayle, but she stopped him. "I'm sorry, Doctor, my daughter, I need to see her...I have to see her." The stress was getting to her again and she was close to tears. William worried about another breakdown when he saw her lips quivering and a wild look come into her eyes.

"Of course, just let me get a wheelchair." Gayle started to protest the need for it, but the doctor wouldn't have it. "No, don't argue with me about the chair, Doctor's orders." Thielsen said with stern kindness. He was back in a moment with a wheelchair, and it was only a matter of minutes before they neared the door to the ICU.

With each step toward his daughter's room, William began to grow anxious. The terrible thoughts the demon had put into him were suddenly coming back again: The vision of Talitha naked flashed into his mind.

William felt like a dirty old man, a pedophile, who should be taken out and shot between the eyes. He wanted desperately to slap himself in the face as hard as he could. Instead, he reached out for Gayle's hand and held it tightly.

Her hand was warm and soft, and so terribly small; he could break it without thinking. Sweating in his apprehension, his big paw was moist, and he kept letting go of her hand to wipe it on his pants. As they entered Talitha's room, he took a deep breath, afraid of what he would see and afraid of the thoughts he might have about his little girl.

The room was warmer than he had expected, and much smaller. He had pictured it to be large, sterile-white and filled with machines and monitors that beeped or sang out shrilly with one emergency after another. Instead, there was only a single, quiet monitor and a technical-looking gadget that helped her to breathe.

In a second, he completely forgot his terrible thoughts and visions. Instead he was overwhelmed with his genuine emotions for his daughter. These were real and he let them loose to run amok through his mind, without worry. He loved his little girl with all his heart and at that moment, she was his favorite and he would do anything for her.

Lisa was sitting in a bright orange chair next to the bed. As promised, she was holding Talitha's hand. Her head rested on the bed and William was instantly worried for her, as he remembered the dreadful draining sensation of his daughter's touch. He thought for a moment that Lisa had passed out while holding Talitha's hand and that maybe she had been bled dry of her warmth or energy. However, just then Lisa opened her green eyes and gave them a tired sympathetic smile.

The girl let go of Talitha's hand and rubbed hers together as if to warm them, and she was on the verge of saying something to Gayle, but Lisa noticed that Gayle only had eyes for Talitha.

With her arm in a cast, Gayle awkwardly pulled herself from the wheelchair and went to the bedside. Her face was full of fear as she bent hesitantly to kiss her daughter. William could see that the nasty feel of the demon was still on Talitha by the way that Gayle grimaced as she kissed her.

"Oh no," Gayle moaned, leaning back up and away. Tears worked their way down her cheeks to drip from her chin in a steady cascade. William went toward her to comfort her, but at that moment, Gayle turned instead to Lisa and hugged her. "Thank you for doing that for holding her hand like that, it must have been so difficult." She then buried her face in the girl's messy blonde hair and cried.

"Please, Mrs. Jern, it was nothing."

After seeing how Lisa was able to touch Talitha, William needed to know for himself and so he went to Talitha and after taking a deep breath, as if he were going to dive into dark cold water, he bent down and gently kissed his daughter on the lips. He knew instinctively he wasn't going to feel them soft and warm, but the icy feeling was worse than he expected and though he felt his life's warmth pulled from deep out of his chest he refused to pull back. He wanted to know if she was still in there; if there was any hint of life in her. Unfortunately all he felt was the unnatural oily sick feeling of the demon. Finally, he stepped back and wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

Will came forward next. He had seen his parent's reaction so he simply reached out and took Talitha's hand. William saw his son's jaw clench tightly, and then he spoke loudly, almost shouting, "I love you, Talitha." With that, he gently put his sister's hand down on the white, cotton blanket and rubbed his own on the back of his pants.

"What's a coma?" Katie asked suddenly. "It looks like she's just sleeping."

The doctor spoke up, "A coma is similar to a very deep sleep. We, doctors I mean, don't really know why it happens but we strongly suspect it's the body's way of protecting itself."

"Oh. Have you tried shaking her real hard?" Katie suggested and William was shocked to see Katie absentmindedly playing with her sister's fingers. She even placed a small kiss on the tips of each one.

"Yes, we've tried to shake her, and everything else we can think of to wake her up," the doctor replied with a smile.

"Her hands are so chilly!" Katie put Talitha's hand in both of her tiny ones and rubbed it vigorously. William looked over at Gayle and Will and they were both staring at the little girl in shock.

"Katie, maybe you should let go of her hand."

"Ok, Daddy I will, once I get it warmed up." She then blew on her sister's hand as hard as her little lungs would allow. Gayle watched Katie with a frantic hopefulness in her eyes. She reached out and gently touched the back of Talitha's hand, but pulled away quickly. The slow trickle of Gayle's tears became a river as she broke down sobbing, and William lowered her back down onto the wheelchair.

"We have to stop this." She looked up and was suddenly fierce. "We have to! I have to be strong for her sake. Doctor, I'm ready... I'm ready... I'm..." Abruptly Gayle broke down again and her fierceness disappeared, replaced with terrific sorrow. "No, I'm not ready, Oh God help me. I'm not ready for this."

Again, she cried and William cried along with her, since he knew what had to happen. Still he wasn't going to rush the mother of his children, not for something like this. The feeling coming from Talitha was that she was in terrible pain, worse than any torture. It was unnatural and abhorrent, and her misery was such that William would rather see her in flames, than to have to go through it any longer. He would have to end it mercifully—and very soon.

Finally, Gayle seemed to lack the strength to cry or to resist logic anymore. "Ok, Doctor, it's time. Please we have to stop this for her sake, for Talitha. Turn off the machine."

Thielsen eyed her warily and it was clear to William that the doctor worried about another hysteria-filled explosion. "Mrs. Jern, I'm so sorry, but I still have to get all the paperwork together, and I'm going to need witnesses and a second physician to sign off on it. None of that will be a problem; it'll just take a little time."

"How long," Gayle whispered.

"An hour, maybe two. If this is what you want. I'll get started on it right away."

"Yes, please do." These words were even quieter. "And thank you for everything." He nodded his head sympathetically and left the room.

Now that it was set in motion, the reality of Talitha's inevitable death struck William hard and he gasped through his tears, "My baby girl... I can't believe this... my baby girl." He grabbed his wife in a great hug and sobbed for a while with his face buried in her hair.

"We have to do this," Gayle said to herself more than to William.

"I know. My poor baby is trapped with... it."

Will spoke up, "Can I call Father Alba?"

Gayle answered, "Yes, I think that would be for the best, but he had better hurry. I'm not leaving her suffering even a second longer than I have to." She saw that Lisa wore a very confused expression and added, "You can tell Lisa if you wish, but no one else."

The two left the room, quietly, Will with his arm around Lisa, who looked alarmed and puzzled at the same time. When they were gone, William noticed that Katie still held her sister's hand and he asked her, "That doesn't bother you at all?"

"Nope, I love Tal and I'm her best friend. And she wants me to hold her hand, even if it's freezing cold."

Gayle sat shaking her head. "She's not going to get married is she? Or have a... babe... I was wrong William, I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. You have to kill

her. It'll be your fault. Ok? Can you do it? For me? Please? It'll be all your fault and I couldn't have stopped you, because you're so big."

His wife seemed to be slipping back into a wild hysterical state of mind so William knelt down to look in her eyes. "Honey, stop it. *We will do this for Talitha's sake. We will do this out of love, ok? It's nobody's fault, the demon is just too powerful, and we have to release her.*"

She had been almost whispering before but now she yelled in his face, "The demon won't keep her! She's too good! She belongs to God."

William nodded his agreement. "Yes she is."

But then Gayle's eyes went wild again and she was racked by sobs as she thought of something else. "She'll need something to wear, something nice... when she... when she goes to Heaven." Gayle's tone slipped back into whispering and it was not to William she was talking to, but to herself. "How about my black dress? The one she really liked, with the frills at the neckline. I wore it at Captain Billier's dinner party."

"Gayle, look at me," William commanded and her eyes, big and wide, came to focus on his. He worried for her mental state and wanted her to concentrate on something and the dress seemed like a good enough choice. "You're right. She'll need a dress, but I think the black one might be a little too... slinky for Heaven."

"Oh, yes, of course."

William remembered one of the last times he had seen Talitha all dressed up: it had been the previous Christmas. The dress she'd worn was white and sleeveless and it made her skin look deeply tanned and healthy. At the time, Gayle had eyed the dress disapprovingly, "*White at Christmas? That's not really suitable.*"

"*If white was good enough for the Virgin Mary, then it should be good enough for me,*" Talitha had responded and Gayle had smiled warmly but mysteriously, leaving William to ponder what was being communicated, if anything, by the dress.

Gayle had been correct about the dress not fitting in with the theme of the party. Talitha stood out in a sea of red and green. Everywhere she went, heads had turned and conversations had lagged—not because she looked out of place, but because she looked so young and beautiful, and even angelic in the white dress.

William smiled through his pain at the memory and said, "How about the white dress she wore at the Admiral's Christmas party last year?"

Gayle looked out the window and he knew that she wasn't seeing the green of the oak trees; in her mind's eye she was at the Christmas party, and she smiled seeing her daughter dancing and laughing. "Yes, get that one please. And my makeup bag, the small one, it's on the sink. She'll need shoes, I think. Yes, shoes, at least at first... in the back of the closet... in a white Macy's box, get those ones. And get a ribbon for her hair. I think the gold one will look nice, yeah... white and gold will fit perfectly for... where... she... is..."

Her tears were now coming too heavily to let her finish her sentence. William held her, rocking back and forth. He was in quiet turmoil at the thought of going back into the house. He knew it had to be done at some point, and not just for the dress. His wallet, money, identification, car keys, clothes; everything they owned was still there and he would need it all. However, just the thought of going back

into the house released a thousand butterflies which flitted about his stomach, making him feel queasy.

"I don't think I can get the dress..." He hung his head, ashamed of his cowardice.

"Oh yeah, the demon," Gayle replied, and her body gave a little spastic twitch. "But that investigator, and his whole team were in the house and you can tell they hadn't seen anything. They might still be there if you go right now. And maybe... maybe it only comes out at night. Or..." and here another thought came to her, "Wait! It's in Talitha. We can feel it in her. That's where it is! You don't have to worry because it's in Talitha, remember? That's why I... you... that's why we have to do this to her." Gayle's attitude turned suddenly again to savage anger. "I hate it! I hate it! I hate that thing. I only hope Talitha drags it up to Heaven and I hope all the angels kick its damn ass!"

Alarmed at his wife's anger William held her good arm down while he attempted to reassure her: "I'll get the dress, ok? And the shoes... and the makeup, ok? Alright?"

"And the ribbon!" she yelled at him, but calmed a bit a moment later. "It's under the sink... the gold one remember? White and gold for Heaven."

"I think she will be the most beautiful of all the angels in Heaven," Katie said and her tears were impossibly large.

Gayle gasped! She had forgotten Katie was in the room. "Yes she will be, Katie. All the other angels will be so jealous! Can I have hug please?" she asked this almost timidly.

"Yes, but you have to come over here on-a-cuz Tal says she needs me to keep holding her hand. Oh, and Daddy? Tal says I need a dress, too. She says I need my white and pink sundress so we can match. And can I have a ribbon also? Can I get a gold one like Tal so all the angels will know we're sisters?"

He helped the struggling Gayle up to hug her daughter and answered her, "I'll get you a ribbon too." And he knew that he would. The house no longer frightened him.

Gayle hugged her daughter and looked into her pretty blues eyes but when she spoke it was to William, "Make sure you take Willy J with you and I think Lisa will help if you ask her."

"No, I want Lisa here with you and Katie and Talitha. She can hold her hand if you get tired Katie."

"I won't ever get tired of holding her hand, Daddy."

"Ok, just in case you have to use the bathroom, then."

Katie immediately started squirming at the thought and just as Will and Lisa walked in, she hopped down and dashed to the bathroom.

Lisa, wearing a stunned expression on her face, presumably at what Will had told her, hesitantly stepped forward and touched Talitha's hand. "I don't feel the demon. Her hand is just cold is all."

"Nobody else seems to be able to either, thankfully, not even Katie," William murmured. He reached out to touch his daughter's hand, but then immediately pulled back. "I think when it *looked* at the three of us, it made some sort of connection, or created a channel, so now we're aware of its presence."

"And it has Talitha." Gayle added. William saw that her eyes were still dancing about, not landing on anything for more than a second before flitting away again. "That's why we have to do it... free her, I mean."

Lisa shook her head slowly at Gayle. "But she's strong! She may be the strongest person I've ever met, and the priest is coming. He said he could be here in a couple of hours. I think you should wait for him, he might be able to do an exorcism or something."

"An exorcism? Just like the movies right?" Gayle said quietly and there was a dangerous tone to her voice. Lisa heard it and looked at her calmly, waiting for the explosion that her years with an alcoholic mother had prepared her for. It came fast. "This isn't a damn movie, Lisa. This is a nightmare that I can't wake up from! Wait another couple of hours?" Gayle gave a derisive snort. "The demon looked at me *for a few seconds* and I was nearly driven out of my mind with its nasty foul stench! You don't understand! Every minute that my Talitha is like this, will feel like months, or maybe years of torture!" Gayle had built up a head of steam in her excitement and was practically yelling at Lisa, who still stood calmly. "If I wasn't such a damn coward I'd put her out of her misery right now! Right Now!" This last Gayle screamed at full volume. Her emotional storm raged in her eyes but then came to an end as quickly as it had begun and staring at the floor, she added quietly, "I just hope that she can forgive me."

"Mrs. Jern, I'm sorry, I didn't know how it was for her."

Gayle looked around as if startled by the calmness in Lisa's voice. "Lisa, I'm the one who's sorry. I really am, I shouldn't yell at you. You've been a great help. It's just I think I might be going insane. I can't seem to hold it together for very long." Silence followed this statement since no one could dispute its honesty. "That's why you have to go now, William. Get the dress and get back here fast. The doctor can be back any moment and I won't wait for you, not for one second. Hurry, but be careful."

William nodded in understanding and then went to Talitha and kissed her despite the foulness of the demon. He wiped his mouth and told her he loved her. He then kissed his wife. "I love you, Gayle. Be strong, do what you have to do for your babies."

For the moment her brown eyes were clear of hysteria and she held him long in an affectionate gaze. "I will be strong... as strong as you. I love you, William. Now go, and get back quick."

"I will." He looked at his son. "We have to get going on a mission. Say your goodbyes and let's move." Will gave his father a puzzled look, before following him out of the room.

3

The day was warm and promised to be warmer still and that was all right with William. As they walked, he explained the need to get a dress for Talitha as well as a few other essential items.

"We'll also get a change of clothes for everyone. Don't load yourself down; we're just going to grab our stuff and go. If you feel anything weird, anything at all, I want you to run, ok?"

"I won't leave without you," Will replied.

"You will if I tell you to," William commanded sternly. "But we'll stick together, so you better believe that if you're running, I'll be right behind you." He smiled at Will to let him know he wasn't afraid and he found it odd that he truly wasn't. When he had kissed Talitha, he'd had the curious sensation that going to the house was the right thing to do, maybe even an important thing to do.

He was strangely lighthearted and even buoyant in his steps. It was likely the beautiful June morning that had him feeling this way; the sun and the warmth acted to dispel his fear of the cold and the dark of the house.

The two did not go straight away to their house; William headed first for the Harris', in the hopes of borrowing some luggage. His were all down in the basement and as buoyant as he felt, he wasn't keen to go down there anytime soon. The Harris' front door opened at the first knock and a disheveled looking Henny Harris greeted them with a tired smile.

Despite his own cares William asked, "Are you ok?"

"Me? Oh yeah, just a long night. The Admiral had a stroke and we've been at the hospital since four this morning. It doesn't look good but he's holding on, somehow."

"I'm so sorry for you and Greg, but can I ask a favor? I need a couple of pieces of luggage, just for a day or two."

"Sure... no problem," she replied yawning.

"Thanks," he said but when she just stood there waiting, almost expectantly, he added, "Could we get the luggage now? We're in a bit of a hurry."

"Come in. I'll go grab them for you." She left and the two stood in her foyer looking about. The house had a closed-up, stale feeling to it and the air held an odd, acidic smell. Will wrinkled his nose at it and William had to agree; whatever she was cooking was likely burning.

A few minutes later, she came bustling up with two pieces of matching luggage. They looked expensive to William and thus he was surprised when she said, "You can keep these if you wish. I was just going out today to get a nicer set."

"That's not necessary, Henny. We'll have them back in a couple of days."

"Whatever..." she dismissed the luggage with a wave of her hand. "So how is everyone? There was quite a commotion on the street last night in front of your house. Is everyone ok?" She was very curious and wasn't bothering to hide it.

"Talitha is sick. She's over at the Island's hospital right now... we..." William's throat tightened up too much to allow him to finish his sentence.

"Sick? Just sick? But all those fire trucks and ambulances. I don't mean to pry..."

Her morbid curiosity was annoying and William felt a stab of anger at his nosy neighbor. "Yep, she's just sick. But we do have to get going." He started out the door, somewhat rudely.

"Ok. I'm really sorry for your... for Talitha being so sick," she called out, but William didn't think she was sorry at all, unless she was sorry not to have heard some juicy gossip. His anger doused the lighter mood that he'd been in and it

hung about him like a cloud as they walked the short distance to their front porch. The anger did take a back seat to his caution, however, as he carefully mounted the brick steps and went to the front door.

"Be careful of that knob, Dad," Will advised. "It was so cold yesterday, the skin of my hand stuck to it."

William gave it a test feel through his shirt, but the knob was as warm as the day, and it turned easily.

"Step back," he ordered his son. Cautiously he opened the front door. It drifted back soundlessly and the blast of frigid air that he was expecting did not materialize.

The house seemed, for the first time, normal.

William felt a good deal of puzzlement over this and stood in the doorway for over a minute sniffing the air and listening to the quiet of the place. There was no sign of the demon and the house seemed completely deserted, which was a disappointment. He had been hoping that some of the investigators were still about the place, but there was no one around. The only indication that anyone but the Jerns had been there, was a fine coating of what William took to be finger print dust.

Grabbing a large potted plant from the front of the porch, he wedged it in the doorway and then stepped boldly into the foyer. He paused, listening intently. Nothing.

William took three steps in and paused again—still nothing. Only then did he begin to relax, but just a little. With a small nod he motioned Will to step across the threshold and then went up the great stairs, stopping halfway up. This pause was a short one and he was moving upwards again in a matter of seconds. At the top William turned and looked at his son. They shared matching grins of sheepish embarrassment and he could see his son relax a little as well.

With the warmth of the house William figured that the demon was indeed a creature of the night, but he still wasn't taking any chances and he motioned for Will to stand guard at the top of the stairs.

Since it was the closest, he went first to Katie's room and recoiled in surprise at the bloody scene. There were trails and pools of dried blood everywhere; he wondered briefly how his wife hadn't bled to death there.

He only allowed himself a few seconds to stare about before he went to the dresser and grabbed some clothes, completely unmindful of whether they matched or not. He then went to Katie's closet and fished out her sundress, all of this went into the first piece of luggage.

His room was next. Unlike the scene in Katie's room, it was near perfect, with only the unmade bed suggesting anything out of the ordinary. Here he didn't pause, but dashed around collecting clothes, shoes, and all of the essentials on his mental list.

Within a minute the first suitcase, bulging at the seams, sat parked at the top of the great stair. William then started down the hall as quietly as his large, heavily muscled body would allow. His sense of purpose hadn't left him, but the back area of the house had seemed to be where the demon was not only the strongest, but also the most likely area for it to be lurking. However, the house still felt completely normal—that is until he stepped into Talitha's room.

The room was a perfect illusion of normalcy.

All of her belongings sat eerily silent waiting for her to return. It was as if her room hadn't heard the news and fully expected her to come strolling in at any second. Her bed looked warm, comfortable, and inviting. John Travolta, hanging in his customary spot, still wore his hair slicked back and still stared out with his impossibly blue eyes. The piles of books that seemed to litter every surface were all impatiently demanding to be read or re-read. It was all somehow inappropriate and even indecent that it jarred him on an emotional level.

His eyes filled with tears and though he tried to hold them back, blinking furiously, they came heavily. A loud snuffle escaped him and in the quiet house he felt sudden embarrassment, and cast a quick guilty glance at his son, who had moved to stand guard in the hall just feet from the backstairs.

Will looked tall and strong, and wore a hard, resolute look on his face. Seeing his son so much like a man, gave William the license, at least momentarily, not to be one. He went and sat on Talitha's bed and cried. He cried, uncaring of the demon, knowing he was being guarded over, and he cried, as he knew he never would in front of Gayle. For nearly five minutes he cried out his misery. He cried until he was hollow and empty and sat staring at nothing.

"Ahem," Will eventually gave a slight cough.

"Right." William shook his head. The sad hollowness he felt inside of him started filling with anger over his family's situation. It got him moving. He wiped his face with his shirtsleeves and took the second suitcase over to the closet. Since Talitha owned only a few dresses, the white one stood out. Quickly, but neatly, he folded the gown and stored it away. Only then did he remember the ribbons.

The man in him didn't want to bother with ribbons. He wanted to get Will's things and go. However the picture of Talitha lying in a coffin, looking like she was simply sleeping came to him. Now the father in him pictured her wearing the white dress and the matching shoes and saw that this was how she would lie forever. Suddenly the ribbon became an imperative.

"Will," he whispered to his son as he placed the suitcase gently down in the hall. "I forgot the ribbon, I'll be right back."

As he turned to go, Will responded with a whisper of his own, "I'm going to get my stuff. Do me a favor and... uh... when you get the ribbon wait right here. I don't want both of us up there. I kinda like the idea of you being down here, you know, to keep an eye on things."

William could tell his son was afraid of being trapped up in the attic, as Gayle had been. It was quite an understandable feeling, therefore he gave his son a quick reassuring nod before hurrying back down the hall to his room. William was in the master bathroom in seconds, and snatched up all of the gold ribbon he could find, stuffing it into his empty cargo pocket. After a last glance around the room, he turned and hurried down the hallway and that was when the demon appeared in all of its glorious malevolence.

From the length of the hall, the demon looked upon William. When it did, the shocking blast of the thing's wickedness sent him reeling backwards.

A tremendous static roared through his brain and there was absolutely no opportunity for rational thought. Now he knew what Gayle had meant by an explosion. She had failed to mention the pain. Invisible flames seared his skin and raced down his spine. He felt the demon punishing him, burning him and he staggered back against the wall between his and Katie's room. His body started reacting on its own. Stumbling like a panicked drunk, tearing at the walls for support, William fled into the master bedroom.

There he threw himself to the floor and writhed in agony, attempting to smother the flames he couldn't see but certainly felt. Thankfully, being out of direct sight of the demon, the burning sensation felt slightly less. The static became muted as well, so that as William crawled across the carpet, a thought was able to slowly balloon up through the pain: *Will is trapped upstairs!*

It was the only thought pushing through the phantom flames, and that was good because he didn't want to think—he wanted to act! William felt a terrific rage surge through him...a terrible anger at what the demon was doing to him and his family, and the rage was stoked by the pain of the fire torturing him. He liked the anger. He wrapped himself in it, knowing he would need it if he was going to fight the beast. And fighting was truly his only choice. There would be no way he'd run from the house, not with his son still inside.

The terrific mental onslaught wavered, but only slightly, as his anger grew. Even though he could still feel the demon pounding at his brain and charring his flesh, he was able to claw his way up the tall dresser. His eyes fell upon his sword. It sat atop his dresser just where he had left it after his inspection.

Trembling, he stood while pain and anger fought for supremacy within him. The feelings were so great that his vision doubled and it took a scrambling hand to find the gold-braided hilt. With a practiced motion, he pulled the polished blade from its gilded scabbard and stared fixedly on it. This is what he needed, a weapon!

The pain faded into the background and his mind became clearer as his anger intensified. Soon his hand shook, as he gripped the hilt with all his strength. Seething with rage, he threw off the worst of the pain and let loose his anger.

"WILL!!!!" he bellowed in his tremendous sea going voice—so loud that the mirror over the dresser shook and he heard a light *zing* sound come from the sword. "It's back! Get ready to run!" He took four long, slow breaths, all the while looking with an unbelievably animalistic ferocity at his sword.

These were purposely not calming breaths, he wanted his fury to be almost beyond his control. The breaths were only to allow Will time to get near the stairs, if he wasn't there already. On the last breath, he held it momentarily, until opening his bedroom door; he let out a bestial challenging roar and charged down the hallway.

In a cold silence, the great, black monstrosity waited for him. It was partially on the stairs leading to the attic and partially on the landing and that end of the house looked like midnight, as if the creature had sucked all the light out of the day.

William felt as if he was running headlong into a vomitus river of cold, unyielding, selfish hate.

It dragged at him, weighing him down and even though he pumped his legs furiously, he couldn't seem to build up any speed; it felt like the slow-motion running of a dream. However, despite this dream-like feeling, he was on top of the demon in a flash, and he felt the near-paralyzing cold of the thing burn his lungs and freeze his sweat.

William swept the sword up and even before he thrust it, he knew the outcome; he would die right there and right then. But he was completely unconcerned about himself and only wished to live long enough that his boy might escape. With that thought, he lunged into the outer reaches of the swirling blackness and thrust his sword with all the great strength of his right arm and shoulder, into what he took to be the face of the beast.

A second can be split in half and each of those can be split again, and this can happen over and over so that a second can be at once quick, just a heartbeat, and also eternal. For William it was both.

With a last flash of light glinting from the steel, he drove his blade into the black pit of the thing, nearly to the hilt. It felt like he had pierced soft yielding flesh, only instead of retreating from the sword, the demon sucked on it hungrily. William knew an instant of revulsion at the feeling but then realized that his mind was his own again! The mental conduit between him and the demon no longer existed. Gone was the torturous pain! The blade seemed to have knocked it askew, almost causing a prism effect, so that William felt the malicious evil of the creature flying all about him without hitting him as it had.

However, what replaced it was far worse: screams of pain, shrieks of the tortured; souls by the tens of thousands desperately crying out for pity, for mercy, for help. This frantic cacophony raced up the length of the sword from the depths of the demon, and in that half second before William knew true misery and before his sword shattered, he not only heard, but also felt every cry, moan, whimper, and shriek. It was overwhelming and after the first tenth of a second, the voices blended together into one gigantic cry of selfish agony. Then right at that moment, exactly at the point when he felt utter despair and helplessness and grief beyond his ability to cope, he heard a single clear voice.

It ran against the grain of the self-centered demands of the damned.

"Run, Daddy!"

It was a pure sound from a pure soul. It rose high above the cries of the sinners. *It was Talitha's voice!*

William wanted to call out to her, to tell her how much he loved her, but more than anything, he wanted to save her—yet there was no time.

For three-quarters of a second, he had been standing with his sword transfixing the demon, and now when he needed time the most, he was out of it. Something had followed the miserable cries up from the deepest layers of the demon: something beyond human ability to comprehend or even to describe.

It was Evil. It was Evil stripped of its petty excuses, of its human desires, of any restriction whatsoever. It was as pure as the voice had been, but it was only pure in its blackness, entirely devoid of a single virtue. It was Evil totally for its own sake and it was Hell.

William had assumed Hell to be a fiery place, but now he knew it was cold: a cold far beyond the understanding of science. It was that combination of cold Evil

that chased the voices up from the depths of the terrifying pit of the creature's face.

William's mind acted in self-defense in the only way it could, it ceased to function altogether and it died. Every cell in his brain, still with the screams echoing through them, simply shut down. With the loss of his brain controlling the rest of his body, William collapsed down the stairs, breaking the connection with the demon. As his body started to fold in on itself, the sword, now brittle with the absolute cold of Hell, exploded into a million pieces, so that it appeared to turn to smoke, which was then instantly sucked into the pit of the creature.

Chapter 10

**Will and Adrina.
June 5th, 1980**

1

On the walk from the hospital, Will tried to hide his fear from his father. He hardly spoke at all and when his teeth began to chatter involuntarily, he clamped his lips together tightly. His hands shook so he kept them stuffed deep in his pockets, and it was only when he reached for one of the suitcases that Mrs. Harris had lent them, that anyone could have seen how they danced about like those of an old man with palsy. He felt that if he were to relax, they would just simply fly away.

By the time they entered their house, the shaking in his hands had progressed to his arms, and he took to almost hugging himself to hide the movement from his father. He held his father in awe. The man... the Commander seemed to be completely fearless and calm, in perfect control.

It only made Will feel worse.

Will understood the logic behind coming back, they would definitely need some of their belongings, and they couldn't stay away forever. But logic and fear did not at all mix. He didn't care that there had been five men going over every inch of the house earlier that morning. Or that there was a great likelihood the demon was a night creature, or in fact may have gone back to whatever Hell it had come from. These logical points did nothing to diminish his terrific fear, however the atmosphere in the house did. It was warm, inviting, seemingly empty, and altogether normal. He allowed himself to relax... too much... so much so that he even talked himself into the idea that going up to the attic alone wasn't at all risky.

All of it; the warmth, the normalcy, the quiet, was part of a trap. The demon had been lurking somewhere, probably in the boiler room and had slipped up the stairs as silent as the smoke it appeared to be. And Will would've been trapped for certain if it wasn't for his father's warning yell. In a flash Will understood completely and he was so keyed up that he didn't need the advice on running.

The Commander's warning coupled with his tremendous fear set him sprinting with amazing speed. So fast was he that he couldn't feel his feet touching the wood of the floor so it almost felt like he was flying. From his room in the attic, he made it down the first flight of stairs in a matter of heartbeats, but stumbled to a halt at the sight just below him.

The demon was there, just feet away, almost filling the entire landing with a churning blackness. A powerful rush of noise in his ears and a mind-numbing fear sent him to the verge of panic, but just as he felt rational thought start to leave him, he heard a distant roar.

In an instant, his father appeared racing down the hallway, charging the great beast. In his upraised right hand he held a gleaming sword. The sword no longer looked to be part of a fancy costume. Now it was a weapon, a real weapon, a man's weapon. His father brought it up in a flash to strike and the highly polished metal seemed to gather the remaining light of the darkened stairwell into it. For an instant it blazed against the dense blackness of the demon.

Commander Jern then threw his arm and body forward in a picture-perfect lunge, so that all of his momentum, weight, and strength centered on the point of the sword. Will watched as the sword drove straight and true into the deadly black pit of the demon's face.

Wild elation filled Will's heart in the half second before the sword seemed to just turn to dust and break off near the hilt. However, in that incredibly short time, he was able to see the heroic look on the Commander's face and the large straining muscles of his sword arm. The pair of them, the Commander and the demon, for just that fraction of a second were frozen as if statues, a picture from the cover of a fantasy book in which the hero wields a mighty sword and never falters in the face of evil.

But his father's sword was neither magical nor mighty and it shattered in a puff of silvery smoke, leaving only a jagged piece just above its gilded hilt. Moreover, his father was not a hero out of a book, he was merely a man. As great as he was, the demon was far greater, and it somehow struck him down so that he collapsed like a ragdoll.

Falling down the stairs, the Commander lay in almost the identical spot and position that Will had been in just the night before, with his feet and legs pointing up toward the landing.

The sword strike had some effect on the demon. The terror, as well as the noise enveloping Will's mind, suddenly left him and he blinked in surprise at the clarity with which he could see the situation. However, it was with dread that he noted that his options were very limited. The demon's immense form nearly filled the landing and left only the smallest amount of room to try to escape down the hallway. It would take a fantastic leap from the railing to jump clear of the creature...but this would leave his father at its mercy.

However, his other two options were more extreme. He could run back upstairs and attempt to scale down the side of the house. That he would fall was a certainty, but he had an even chance of living and if he didn't, it would at least be a natural death. Again, this would leave his father abandoned to the demon. His other option was an almost suicidal jump from over the railing, onto the stairs between the demon and his father. He would have to pass through at least part of

the dreadful unknown of the demon's mass, which for all he knew could kill him outright just by touching it.

In a flash he saw all of this with that amazing lucidity his unfettered mind enjoyed and Will came to a decision with a speed born of necessity. After what had happened to Talitha the choice was a simple one: he would save his father or die trying.

In the same second that he made up his mind, he gripped the railing, and with a huge thrust from his powerful legs, hurled himself over it, twisting in midair like a cat so that he would land oriented with the stairs, facing the demon. As he twisted, he plowed through the outer reaches of the demon's "body" and discovered the impossible cold that tortured the very air around it.

The blackness was not solid, at least not the part he traversed. Close-up he was able to see that the air, fouled by its very proximity to the beast, was constantly changing from a black gas, to a slick, oily, ebony liquid. Underneath that, and only partly visible, the liquid solidified into a shiny, crystalline mass.

Even as he somersaulted over and through it, he took a mental snapshot of this and the picture, Will knew, would be there etched into his memory until the day he died. The solid part of the demon was made up of thousands of tiny faces, each of which looked to have been chiseled with exquisite detail, out of the shiny substance. They were layered—faces upon faces and each contorted grotesquely in untold misery.

His mind rebelled against the very idea, but the stairs were shooting up at his feet in a rapid blur and he took the picture and stuffed it deep within himself. His body cared nothing about faces or demons, but only about sticking the landing after a nine foot twisting fall.

And it did, with barely a foot to spare on either side, the demon in front of him and his father's out stretched feet behind. Again, there was not a tenth of a second to lose in hesitation or to cast a look back down the stairs, and even as his feet and legs flexed to absorb the impact of the fall, Will shot up again in a blind backwards leap.

Only an Olympic gymnast or a seventeen-year-old boy could have made both jumps and landings with such perfection. Will had been in training for this very moment all his life. He had spent thousands of hours on the playground, in trees, at the park, and on the football field, all the while honing his physicals skills so that in the darkened stairwell where the slightest error meant a terrifying death, he was able to confidently throw his body backwards over his father, not knowing where he was going to land, only knowing that he would.

Only a boy who had spent years accepting impossibly stupid dares, who had leapt from trees, fences, buildings, and even the tops of moving cars, could have done it. Will was that kind of boy. At the beach or the pool during the endless summer days that seemed like heaven, no dive was ridiculous enough in its danger to slow him down, if there was a sun kissed girl nearby to impress.

It was that combination of recklessness and youthful agility that Will relied upon as he flew backwards, hurtling down in the darkness, over the body of his father.

He twisted slightly and looked behind him at the long steep staircase and his eyes locked in onto his targeted landing spot. His hands reached out and gently

caressed the walls zipping by, and with a little pressure at just the right moments, he was able to guide and correct his fall, so that he landed dead on.

The same flexing motion of his body occurred on impact; this time, instead of jumping back, his hands shot out to grab his father's wrist so that he could use his momentum to heave the big man the rest of the way down the stairs. His mind screamed a warning, Talitha's touch had an energy draining effect, and his father's could very well have it too, but his body was well past responding to fear. It was mission oriented and his hands moved in a blur, seemingly of their own volition, and took his father's wrist and just as his legs began to rebound from the fall, he pulled back hard on that wrist.

He was not gentle. Will's fingernails dug deep into the skin as he threw his weight back, his legs pistoning and surprisingly the big man was easier to pull than he expected. However, with the speed he gained there also came a tha-dump, tha-dump, tha-dump sound of his father's head on the stairs. Again, his mind screamed at him, this time to be careful. Yet bumps and bruises were acceptable and within mission parameters and his body only pulled harder.

It was just as the staircase went from dark to midnight black, that Will realized the good news that his father was not draining the energy from him. The bad news was he could see the darker shadow of the beast moving down the stairs, closer and closer to his father's outstretched feet.

Will began to worry; he was going as fast as he could expect to go, and once he hit the flat linoleum of the kitchen he knew he'd slow down considerably. Suddenly he jarred hard against the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

"Uhh!" He grunted out a rush of air and a precious second was lost, as his momentum was checked. Heedless of any damage to the wrist, he yanked his father out of the tight corner and into the kitchen.

A quick glance around the room showed him the obstacles barring the way to freedom: the kitchen table, he would detour around; a chair that lay on its side, presumably knocked over in his chaotic flight from the house—this he could kick out of the way, and finally the back door.

The back door had been stuck the night before and Will suddenly envisioned himself straining at it with the demon coming up behind. That image was like a kick to the stomach. But worse, barely five feet into the room and just moving to his right to clear the table, he saw that the demon had gained the doorway and felt its cold horror reach out for him.

The air seemed to vibrate as the heavy malicious intent of the beast swept over him and then unbelievably, passed him altogether. For a moment mad euphoria gripped the boy and he pumped his legs as hard as he could, thinking for the first time that they might actually escape.

Seconds later when he glanced up to see the demon was still in the doorway of the staircase, he had to fight a desire to cheer. It was a full ten feet away now and Will only had to...

He stumbled on the over-turned chair and fell over backwards, landing hard on his backside; his grip on his father's wrist broken.

The chair made a stifled sort of clattering and the demon suddenly seemed alerted to his position. Will felt it striving to look upon him with its cold and deadly

gaze. He could feel it all around him. Yet it was unfocused, and though horrifying, it didn't stop him from climbing to his feet once again.

The demon had other ways to kill besides its gaze, and it swept forward in complete silence like a wind-born cloud of pestilence. Terror rifled along his nerves at the sight and in desperation, Will made to haul the heavy body again, but he gave a peek back at the kitchen door and he saw he wasn't going to make it in time. Looking to defend himself, he snatched up the fallen chair, but then a thought struck him. Instead of raising it to strike the onrushing demon, he hurled the chair past it toward the dining room.

The chair was heavy and wooden, but the sound was incongruously quiet and muffled. Still, it was enough, and the demon suddenly shifted direction as Will had hoped and moved toward the dining room, lightning quick.

Will was moving even before the chair had stopped tumbling and once again took up his father and hauled him to the door. The door, which had seemed unnaturally difficult to open just the night before, now opened with ease and Will was blasted by heat and blinded by the light of day.

Blinking against the sunshine and the tears that he hadn't realized had flooded his eyes, Will pulled the Commander to the supposed safety of the golf course. There he felt suddenly weak, with the thick hot air making his head swim. Dropping to his knees to keep from fainting, he looked down and noticed how amazingly blue his father's eyes were compared to the rich green of the grass.

Those blue eyes refused to blink at the new light, but only stared upwards, lifeless.

2

"Dad! Hey, Dad!" Forgetting the demon entirely, Will pulled the Commander's face toward him. The blue eyes rolled back and to the side. "Dad! Look at me!" Gripping the broad muscled shoulders, he gave his father a hard shake and watched in horror as the head lolled away from him. In a panic, he leaned in to listen at the thick chest for some sign of life; he heard nothing but his own ragged breathing.

"Oh jeez!"

At his father's urging Will had taken CPR a year before and now he tried to recall the thirty-minute lesson, only his mind was a jumble. The instructions coming back to him were muddled in a useless random order. Every moment had been precious to him in the house, but now seconds were flying by as he searched his memory for the proper method to revive his father.

"In CPR, which is more important? That the victim's heart is beating, or that he is breathing?" The instructor's question came to him then. He had turned to look at Talitha knowing instinctively she would have the answer.

Under the warm sun, in the green of the golf course, her response refused at first to come to him and he began rocking back and forth, moaning in anguish.

"Breathing... heart beat? What should I do?" he asked his silent father. The body—the corpse really, just laid there. Perhaps it didn't matter, he couldn't make

things worse after all. Will went to the chest but then the answer he wanted came ghosting out of the murky depths of his mind:

"Since either is useless without the other, and neither will last but a few seconds without its complement, what is truly important, is to have the victims airway open and unobstructed." Talitha said this in such a way that it seemed beyond contention. Yet it had been contested and fiercely, but not by Will.

"Open airway," Will murmured. His hands remember the lesson even if his brain didn't and he quickly positioned his father's head properly, with the chin up. On impulse, or perhaps as part of his half-forgotten training, he listened for a few more precious seconds and again there was no sound of breathing.

That he should breathe for his dad, he knew, but how many breaths and for how long was lost to his memory. He pinched off the nose and blew a great blast of hot air into the lungs and then paused to see if this had any effect.

When nothing happened he blew in a second longer, heavier breath, as if he were attempting to inflate the body. Another pause, and Will felt on the verge of crying in desperate panic. The lesson was now becoming a complete clutter in his mind. There had been so many different hand placements, and breathing/compression ratios to learn and every question put to the instructor had been answered beginning with, "It depends."

One thing that did come back clearly, was the warning that during compressions, he'd likely break rib bones. He was supposed to ignore the crunching sound and just carry on regardless.

The warning had the opposite of its intended effect however, and Will, not wanting to break anything, administered compressions to his father's chest that were as ridiculously shallow as the breaths had been huge. After ten seconds of compressions, he suddenly remembered he was supposed to be counting, but to what number he had no idea.

He was at 36 when the body burped loudly.

Quick as a wink, he was at his father's face, peering into it. "Dad?" He asked quietly but after a moment, he yelled loudly, "Dad!"

Out of the blue, he slapped the face lightly. This hadn't been in the CPR class, but it had been in enough of the movies that he liked to watch for his subconscious to believe this was an acceptable method for revival. The slap had been too light however, since the face had only gently rocked back and forth. Therefore he hauled back and struck it a proper blow, hard with the palm of his hand. Another long gaze into the face followed this. The eyes had closed at some point and he pried one of them open, looking for some sign of life in them, but it stared out blank and the only effect the slaps had were to turn the cheek slightly red.

Will wanted to stop; he was wasting his time uselessly abusing his father's body.

Once begun, never stop CPR until:

A) The victim recovers and begins breathing on his own.

B) Another qualified rescuer takes over.

C) You are physically unable to go on.

D) All of the above.

The test question popped into his head just then. Initially, he had put down 'A', but Talitha, sitting next to him, had given a slight cough. He did a quick re-read and went with 'D' instead.

He would go on with the CPR.

Without much hope, he bent and blew another gigantic breath into the body. Then he took two enormously deep breaths, as if he were going to swim submerged across the length of a pool, and again blew hard as he could. As Will was doing this he caught movement in the corner of his eye.

His father's left hand rose up weakly and even as he watched, it feebly tried to push him away. Will leaned back, completely unaware that his eyes were overflowing with tears. He was afraid to say anything, worried that the hand would stop moving if he did. But the hand stopped moving anyway, falling back into the grass, as seemingly lifeless as it had been only a moment before. He leaned over his father, dripping tears onto his face, and asked quietly, "Dad?"

"Stop... it," the answer came back, in a very quiet whisper.

"Ok, ok. I will... what should I do? I don't know what to do." There was no answer to this and the relief he had been feeling vanished. He leaned down to see if his father was breathing. Seconds went by without any movement of the chest, but then there was a slight drawing in of the diaphragm.

"Dad!" he shouted into his father's face. "I'm going to call an ambulance. I'll be right back so don't worry." He rocked back on his heels to haul himself up but his father's eyes opened the slightest crack.

"No... run... run to the... hospital." Will had to lean all the way over him again so that his ear was an inch from his father's lips. "Don't let them kill... Talitha."

Will looked into his eyes. "No, Dad. I've got to..."

"Now!" Commander Jern demanded with a little more force. "Don't let them kill your sister."

"Ok, I will. Don't worry."

"Run." It was spoken faintly, the Commander's eyes then closed, and his head lolled on to its side. Will had another panic filled moment, until he saw the chest rise, ever so slightly. Then hope flared up again. Hope, not just for his father, but for Talitha as well. His father must have seen something, or perhaps felt something to make him change his mind about allowing Talitha to die. He hopped up and literally ran straight into Brian Galt, knocking the smaller boy to the ground.

"Brian, I need your help!" he shouted into his friend's face as he stooped and without thinking, lifted him easily to his feet. Will shoved him toward the Harris' house, "Call an ambulance! My dad was... he had a heart attack. Call and get back here and stay with him."

"What about..."

"Just go!" he yelled at Brian and gave him another shove. A great urgency filled Will and the smaller boy must have sensed it because he took off running toward the Harris' house, while Will set off at a dead sprint for the hospital which sat nestled under large oak trees, just over two hundred yards away.

Will's lungs started to burn halfway to the building, but he put his head down and ran on, concentrating solely on the grass of the Village Green fly beneath the blur of his feet.

He surprised himself at how quickly his feet hit the black asphalt of the parking lot and seconds later, he slid and skittered on the waxed hallways dodging doctors and nurses. Bursting through the doors of the Intensive Care Unit, he ignored the angry shouts directed at him and raced for Talitha's room. The fear of being too late overpowered everything else and Will barely noticed Lisa, who sat cradling a crying Katie. Her eyebrows shot up quickly but not as fast as Will, who blew by her without a word and slammed open the door to his sister's room.

Inside he saw his mother crying over Talitha, holding her hand, while Doctor Thielsen stood gaping at him in surprise. The doctor's hands were working at the tape holding Talitha's breathing tube in place at the side of her mouth. Will slowed only slightly. His breath fired out of him in great ragged gasps, and he knew it would be a waste of valuable time trying to talk to the doctor; instead Will went right up to him and grabbed his hands firmly.

"Will..." His mom began, shock at his sudden entrance showing through her tears.

"Stop! Stop... you can't..." he said, between huge gulps of air. "You can't... you can't... Dad says not to... he..."

The doctor looked at Gayle uncertainly and then turned to Will. "I'm sorry son, but..."

"No. I can't let... let you do it," Will said, interrupting the doctor. He conveyed the sincerity of the statement by increasing the strength of his formidable grip. The doctor's eyes widened in anger—but also fear.

"Look son, this isn't how you act..."

"I know... I'm sorry but... my dad told... me..."

"Willy J, where's your father?" Gayle asked with trepidation coloring her voice, her eyes knew already there was trouble. He was just about to reply, when the frantic sound of an ambulance siren rippled the air. The little color left in Gayle's face drained away completely. "No, please no. That's not for your father is it? Tell me he's all right, ok?"

"Something happened..."

His mom cut him off, "Is he... is he..." Her eyes went to Talitha.

"No, he's not like that. He's alive, Mommy." Will's tears were back and rolled unheeded down his face. His breathing had calmed somewhat but his hold on the doctor's fingers had not relaxed a bit. "He's alive... but he's not doing so well."

"What happened? Was there another attack?" Doctor Thielsen demanded furiously. Will only nodded and the doctor tried to pull his hands away. "Let go damn it. Talitha will have to wait." Will released his grip and the doctor raced out of the room.

"Oh my God," Gayle cried in a voice filled with misery. She looked so pale that Will could see the veins standing out clearly under her skin. Her hands shook as she held her daughter's and Will realized that the contact must have been draining everything she had left. He hurried to her side and gently pried her hands away from Talitha's cold ones. "Oh my God," she repeated, as he lowered her into the wheel chair. "He's not like her? Are you sure?"

"No, no he isn't. He had a heart attack I think, but he's alive and he told me to save Talitha. He saw something, Mommy, something about Talitha."

"Why did I do it? Oh, why did I make him go back into that awful place?"

"It's not your fault. He wanted to go."

"No, I made him go." she said bitterly. Her face was pinched, and Will thought she had aged a great deal in the last day.

Will saw there was going to be no talking her out of the self-flagellation so he tried a different tact. "You should've seen him, he was like a hero out of a book. He fought the demon. He attacked it with his sword, and he stabbed it, right in the... where the face should be and he saved me. Mom don't be sad, be proud of him."

"I am proud of him. I've always been proud of him. But if it weren't for me..." she looked down at her hands and her tears fell into them. "Did he kill it? When he stabbed it, did it die, or go away?"

The siren was now practically on top of them— it seemed to be just outside their window. Will looked out, but the ambulance was hidden from view by the canopy above the emergency room entrance. "No, I don't think so, but Mom we should go to him."

"No, not yet. They won't let us anywhere near him, at least for a while." She seemed to be recovering from the touch of her daughter and the shock of Will's news. "Please sit down, Willy J. You look like you're going to shake to pieces."

"What?" Looking down at himself, he saw that he was holding his arms bent, so that his hands were close to his chest—they were shaking badly. His whole body seemed to be shaking and a great hollow weakness filled him. The notion that he just might faint came to him and he lurched to one of the uncomfortable orange plastic chairs, collapsing into it.

"Lisa, can you please come hold Talitha's hand for me, thanks." Gayle's voice was weary, yet still commanding. "And Katie can you go warm up your brother, he looks to be freezing."

He looked up to see Lisa and Katie in the doorway. Each wore an identical worried frown. "What happened? Is everyone ok?" Lisa asked cautiously as Katie came and clambered up into Will's lap, giving him a kiss on the cheek once she had settled in.

Will told them an abridged version of what had happened so as not to scare Katie too much.

"Wow," Lisa said, quietly and the room was silent for a few minutes as each of them took in the story.

After quite a while, Gayle took a deep, steadying breath. "Willy J, are you feeling better?" she asked. "Do you think you can push Katie and me down to the E.R. to see dad?" Nodding, he picked up his feather light sister and gently put her in her mother's lap.

3

Gayle had been correct; the three of them were denied admittance to see William. They were left to cool their heels in the waiting room for a good long time.

They were told that he was in 'serious but stable condition', nothing more. At first, they thumbed through old *Time* magazines and copies of *Highlights*, searching for Waldo, but then, despite the uncomfortable chairs each fell into a

deep sleep. It was over an hour later before a nurse came and woke them up, allowing them to come back.

Will was shocked at the ashen, grey appearance of his father's normally healthy-looking face. His eyes were red-rimmed with great dark circles under them.

"How is Talitha?" William asked, in a voice as rough as sandpaper.

"She's the same. What's wrong? Was it your heart or..." Gayle asked and she trembled with fear at what he might say.

"They think it was a minor heart attack, but it feels like it was something different... worse maybe. I could be wrong of course. I've never had a heart attack before, but I don't have any of the symptoms they describe." His weak voice ranged barely above a whisper and they all leaned in to him to hear him speak. "I just... it doesn't matter. What does matter is Talitha. We were wrong about *It*. It's not in her. Her soul is in *IT*. And the dem... the thing I should say, is not even here—at the house I mean, it's somewhere else. I don't know how it works but I think it's a part of a portal or gateway."

"Where does this gateway lead to?" Will was afraid he already knew the answer, but it was a question that burned in him.

"I don't know, but somewhere unpleasant I'm sure," William responded, his voice quieter still. "But I know this: if let Talitha die, she'll be trapped there forever. We can't do that to her." Here the Commander paused to take a deep breath before going on. "Will, do you know when Father Alba might arrive?"

"He said late this afternoon, he wasn't very specific."

"Do you think he can do something?" Gayle asked hopefully, looking from father to son.

"I don't know, but if anyone can I think it'll have to be a priest," William answered. He rested his head back on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. There was a long silence and Will stared down at his shoes and thought of nothing. A few minutes later, he saw that his father was asleep again and that his mother was drowsing in her chair. Only Katie seemed awake, she smiled at him and put one of her tiny fingers to her mouth, suggesting they should be quiet.

The nurse who had brought them in, walked by and Katie eyed her with surprising suspicion. Will watched as her blue eyes roved over the lady and the similarity between Katie and her sister was never more apparent. They were normally as different as night and day and not just their features. It was their personalities. Katie seemed to have too much life and energy to be contained in one small person. It flowed from her unchecked, a wild untamed river without beginning or end. Talitha, on the other hand was reserved, holding everything in, and though not miserly with her life, she was careful with the precious gift.

Now Will noticed how Katie eyed the hospital staff with that same keen perception that he envied in Talitha and his father. She scrutinized each person from head to toe with those big blue eyes. At one time he would've described those eyes as being innocent. Now they were icy.

It was not long before Doctor Thielsen came in accompanied by another doctor. There seemed to be some dispute between the two concerning the cause of William's heart attack. Will didn't trouble himself with the details since they were both wrong. He sat staring at his shoes some more, as each made suggestions concerning exercise and proper nutrition.

Finally, a very tired Doctor Thielsen asked Gayle, "Do you wish to rescind the order to withdraw life support from Talitha?"

"Yes... for the time being."

"Good, that's what I was hoping for. I'm going off-shift. Doctor McKew in the ICU will be checking in on you, Commander. We're transferring you up there in a few minutes." He looked gravely at Gayle. "Your husband needs lots of rest, and he doesn't seem to be an ideal patient in that arena. Can you make sure he stays put for while?"

She nodded, but the Commander's eyes narrowed in his weary and sick face. If he was going to say anything, he wasn't given the chance; there was a sudden flurry of activity about him as he was prepped for the move upstairs. Minutes later he transitioned to a room just across the hall from Talitha, and as soon as he was settled in, Will left to check on her.

Brian Galt stood beside her bed, holding her hand, his face fairly glistened with tears. Will stepped back so as not to embarrass him in his grief and spied Lisa sitting on the floor wrapped in a blanket. Sitting next to her, he whispered his love for her.

She asked and he told her about his father's condition. With confidence she responded, "He's going to be fine. You know he will. Who's tougher than your dad, right?" When he only nodded glumly she snuggled closer. "Come here. Get under the blanket." He did and even as she kissed him on the forehead, he was falling asleep.

"Willy J? Hey, Willy J! Are you in a coma too?" Small hands attempted to shake him awake. He tried hard to open his eyes and finally one cracked enough to see Katie, who smiled with genuine relief that he wasn't in a coma. "Hi Willy J sleepy-head. Father Alba is here and daddy wants you to go to his room." He blinked at her, trying to figure out what she was talking about.

"What? Father Al...what?" Will asked, groggily.

"Father Alba... *Al-Bah*. You know, the guy who came to dinner with that stinky smoking thing." Katie replied to his incoherent question as she made to lift him up from the floor.

It was all coming back to him and the memory brought along a great deal of anxiety with it. "Right, the priest," he said. A low snuffle made him look to see that Brian was still next to the bed. His face no longer shone with tears but was now set in an angry look of hard determination. He still held Talitha's hand, but even as Will watched, Brian switched hands rubbing the cold one on the leg of his jeans.

"UMPH! Come on Willy J," Katie grouched, struggling mightily, "Daddy's gonna be mad at you on-a-cuz you're so slow." He worked his body up, allowing her to think she was doing the lion's share of the work. "Are you hungry?" she asked him. "It's kinda funny but the doctor people brought Talitha dinner, even though she's asleep in her coma and all. I ate the Jell-O. It was red."

"No, thank you, we'll save it for Talitha when she wakes up." He wasn't hungry despite the clock telling him he had missed three meals and numerous snacks already. "Wow after six?"

"Yeah it's been really, really boring watching everyone nap. Even daddy napped and he never naps." Katie shook her head at the waste of a pretty day. "Hey, Willy

J, nobody tells me nothing. What does it mean... *heart attack*? Can your heart really attack you from inside? Does it have teeth or something?"

"No, I think it means that your heart stops beating and it needs help to get going again." Katie opened her mouth to ask one of an infinite number of follow-up questions but Will forestalled her: "I have to go see dad, remember. Can you wait here with Brian? I think this will be a Grown up and Big Kid talk and I need someone who really knows how, to stand guard over Talitha." He picked her up and placed her on the bed with her sister. Katie nodded glumly, but was already helping herself to Talitha's dinner when he left.

His father's room was quiet and the atmosphere exceedingly tense. Even the normally loquacious Father Alba simply stood quietly, fidgeting with the buckle of a satchel he had over his shoulder. William appeared only slightly better from his long nap, and when he finally did speak it was with a gravely but clearly audible voice. "Brian, can you please wait in the other room with Talitha?" Will glanced behind him, and was a little surprised to see Talitha's boyfriend standing there.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jern," Lisa said cautiously. "I've already told him the whole story. I hope that was ok. He loves your daughter and I felt he should hear the truth." Brian looked at the Commander in that confident manner of his, and William stared back appraisingly.

He must have been ok with what he saw. "Brian and Lisa, this goes no further. You don't tell your parents, friends, not even your diary." When they nodded in agreement, he began his story, starting with the Greek painter and ending when Will pulled him from the house. His voice, not strong to begin with, grew weaker and more hoarse, and when he finally finished he took a long deep pull at a glass of water that sat next to his bed.

Everyone stared at the priest waiting for answers, but he just looked at the floor, still fiddling with the buckle. When nearly a minute passed Will became a little angry. "You do believe him, don't you? My mom and I are eyewitnesses, and so is Katie."

"I don't know really. If what you're saying is true... I don't know. I think this is out of my league really. I thought..." The buckle made a *click-tick* noise and the man's face was uneasy.

"You thought what?" Commander Jern demanded in his rasping voice. "You must have suspected something. Why else did you point out the placards to me at the church? Why did you insist on the house-blessing?"

"I thought it could be a ghost, or a lost spirit, something interesting like that." *Click-tick, click-tick*. "But a demon? A real demon, that's too much."

William leaned back in his bed looking exhausted and Gayle spoke up with irritation in her voice, "Too much for what exactly? You're a priest, isn't this what you do? Fight evil?"

"Yes of course, but... not really. It's just some priests; not all of us." *Click-tick*.

Gayle looked doubtfully at the man. "So you aren't going to help us?"

Click-tick, click-tick. "I didn't say that. I just don't know exactly what we're dealing with here. First Commander Jern says it's a demon, and then he says it's a portal. And then there is..." his hand subconsciously patted the satchel.

"There's what?" came the raspy voice of the Commander. "Please tell us what you know or why you suspected our house was haunted."

Click-tick, click-tick, click-tick.

The priest's fidgeting increased in tempo. "It was Judith Nelson. The Nelsons lived in the house just prior to you. Out of the blue, she started attending Mass two-to-three times a week and then she started coming to confession... a lot. She was always very chatty after Mass and I began to wonder if she was lonely or bored." He looked around nodding, and Will could see the sweat in his thin hair. "Then after about three weeks she was clearly starting to make things up at confession in order to come and see me. So I confronted her about it." Father Alba chuckled, ruefully, and shook his head in embarrassment. "I was actually worried that she... you know liked me. Stupid, I know, but it has happened before, just never to me." *Click-tick, click-tick, click-tick.* "Either way, either way, she took a long time to spit out that she felt her house was haunted. She told me about how it was cold in certain areas and that sometimes she had seen odd things, pretty much the same things you're experiencing."

He paused and looked down to the floor, and the buckle became a constant *click-tick, click-tick, click-tick.* "I didn't believe her, and I uh, suggested that she see a psychiatrist."

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Father," Commander Jern said. "You would've been correct doing just that almost a hundred percent of the time."

"That's what I tell myself," Father Alba said. A moment later he finally stopped jiggling the buckle and put his hands in his pockets. "Either way, she stopped coming to church or to confession and a few weeks later I ran into her while at the commissary. She was a wreck. She didn't look like she had slept in days; it was the saddest thing. So I told her that if she wanted me to, I would be happy to come over and bless the house. Right on the spot she broke down in tears. So I went with her to the church to collect my things and she clung to me weeping in the worst way, and I felt horrible for abandoning her the way I did."

He started again with the buckle, *click-tick, click-tick, click-tick,* and then began to pace in the small room, his sweat standing out in beads. "I did the blessing and she insisted I do every room including the staircases and then she had me do the basement. She wouldn't go down there for anything. I went alone, going from room-to-room speaking loudly so that she could hear me and I finished with the boiler room."

He paused dramatically, looking around, *click-tick, click-tick, click-tick.* "The boiler room was cold, really cold and I started to get a creepy feeling in there. So I hurried and did my prayers and as I was finishing, I started to sprinkle the Holy Water, but I raised my arm too high, and some of the water hit the light bulb hanging from the ceiling." He stopped, obviously remembering the scene, and the buckle clicking slowed in tempo. "The light bulb was right over head and it must have been hot and POP! It actually exploded. And just as it went out I saw... something. Just as you did, Commander, it was there but not there. I almost screamed. I'm embarrassed to say it, but it gave me such a fright that I nearly screamed. I would've run upstairs, only I was frozen in place with fear. I stood

there, really unable to move, but after a few minutes when nothing further happened I left as fast as I could. On the way up the stairs, I felt... better, lighter. It was as if a weight had been lifted from me and the wonderful part was that Mrs. Nelson felt it too. She was smiling and laughing, it was a great moment."

A smile at the memory lit up his face briefly, but it didn't last. "For the next few weeks everything seemed great. She started coming to church again and she looked good but then she got sick, physically sick. No one knew it at the time, but she wrote to me a couple of weeks ago and it turns out she had heavy metal poisoning... Mercury poisoning I think she said. She blamed it on the house and it got me thinking about the place. I checked around the library for more information but there was nothing. I'd almost lost interest in it when I ran into Skipper outside your place, just a few days before you moved in. He was standing there looking at the house and when I walked up he began talking like we were the best of friends hanging out at a bar." Without asking, the priest took a long drink from William's water glass. "Thanks."

"What did Skipper say?" Gayle demanded, with exasperation shaking her voice.

"Well, he told me how three people were murdered in that very house."

"You only showed me the names of two people," William said.

"The third was a sixteen-year-old girl, Emily Fortini. She was the daughter of one of the murdered men. Anyway, Skipper laughs and told me the Army had covered it up. He said he was the only one left on the Island who knew anything about it."

"Why would the Army bother covering up a murder on a Coast Guard base?" Will asked, perplexed. "It doesn't make any sense."

"The murders were twenty-one years ago. Back then this island was an Army base," Father Alba explained. "So Skipper told me what he knew. A fire broke out one night and when the firemen responded, they all started to choke on a foul stench. He said that a body, the girl's, was burning in the basement and that the smell was horrible and caused some of the men to throw up. When they finally got the fire contained they searched the place and found two more bodies in an attic bedroom."

"Did the demon do it to them? Kill them, I mean?" Lisa asked. Her face looked a sick shade of green. "You keep saying murdered..."

"Yeah how did they die?" Will was filled with morbid curiosity.

"I don't think the demon killed them... at least not directly. Skipper only knew the manner of death for Colonel Fortini. He was shot in the back of the head... Skipper called it execution style, but I don't know what that means really."

"What about the girl?" William asked. "Do you know if she was... like Talitha? Did she have the same unnatural symptoms? Did Skipper mention her at all?"

"I'm afraid not, but he did mention that the other murdered man was a priest. He was trying to frighten me I think, and it worked. When I went back to my room that night I checked to see if the priest, Father Menning was his name, had left a working diary, which many military priests and chaplains do. But either he never had one or it was seized by the military or so I thought. When Will called and told me what had happened to Talitha, I decided to look through the older diaries to see if any other priests had mentioned something strange about the house. It turns out Father Menning was a bit of a cheapskate and instead of buying his own

diary, he just continued in the diary of the priest who served the parish before him."

He stopped speaking, and ironically fumbled for a few seconds with the buckle of the satchel he was carrying before pulling an old book from it. Flipping it open to the last entry he read aloud in his practiced speaking voice:

"June 14: An unfortunate event has occurred in the Fortini household, young Emily has fallen ill. She's a regular at Mass and her strong singing voice will be missed. She's been taken to the island's infirmary and her current diagnosis is 'metabolic inconsistency'. Her father may be suffering some mental instability because of this and has asked, nay, demanded that I perform an Exorcism on the poor girl. I explained that I could not do so without permission, and that I would contact Cardinal Spellman as soon as I could. I made the attempt, but got no closer to the Cardinal than the Auxiliary Bishop's personal secretary. He said he's seen this sort of thing time and again, and suggested I administer Last Rites to the girl but just in Latin, since it was unlikely that Col. Fortini would understand the language. He added that by doing this I'd be killing two birds with one stone. I heartily agreed.

June 15: Just returned from visiting Emily Fortini. After seeing her deplorable condition, I decided on the spot, not to wait on the Rites and performed an Extreme Unction and administered Viaticum as best as I was able under the circumstances. The attending physician told me the poor girl wasn't likely to last through the night and it's my opinion that she won't even make it to dinner. Her skin was amazingly cold to the touch, which the doctor assured me was a symptom of her malady. Col. Fortini still shows mental instability. He left this evening to fetch his mother because as he puts it, "We need her kind of help." Part of me wishes that he doesn't make it back in time, I think it would be better for both the Father and the Daughter."

Father Alba closed the book, and glanced about nervously. "According to Skipper, the fire-Station got the call around ten that night and he was there personally when they brought the priest's body out, it was mangled..." Father Alba took a deep breath and looked down at the floor.

"What else did Skipper tell you?" William asked.

"That the priest was wearing the vestments for the Easter service..."

"Don't lie to me!" Commander Jern spoke with a quiet but ominous tone, and his eyes, tired as they were, flashed angrily.

The priest looked suddenly desperate and fearful. "I'm not lying, he said that, but he also said... he said that the body was mangled and bleeding from the eyes! Except he said the eyes were gone, torn out, and the gossip was that he ripped them out himself. And the face was purple... a dark purple that was almost black."

"Oh," William said without any force in his voice this time. The room was silent for a few minutes as each took in the horrible mental picture. The priest was breathing heavy and his eyes were bulging and wide.

"Father? What is Extreme Unction and... the other word you said?" Will asked in an effort to end the long silence.

The question seemed to distract the priest from whatever hellish vision was going through his mind, and he responded steadily, "Viaticum is the word you're looking for and it's part of the Last Rites. It would be the final Eucharist, what people usually call Holy Communion. Extreme Unction is what we call today, Anointing of the Sick. It's a sacrament, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which renews confidence and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of discouragement, despair, and anguish at the thought of death or the struggle of death."

The answer seemed to stir William, who sat up a little straighter. "Would this Father Menning have done the Last Rites a second time at the house?"

"He could, there's no church canon stopping him, but the question is, why would he do it at the house at all, since he had already administered the sacrament at the infirmary? Personally I think that sometime after writing the diary entry he changed his mind and attempted an exorcism."

"Attempted?" William asked.

"Yes... they can go disastrously wrong." The priest licked his lips and his eyes went even wider.

"Is that what you're so afraid of then?" William accused contemptuously. "You didn't seem too afraid when you pulled me into your church playing amateur ghost hunter. But now you have something real to fight and you turn shy, is that it?"

"Yes," Father Alba admitted in a small voice, "But like I said, I don't even know what we're dealing with. We don't even know if an exorcism will even work. Father Menning might've done everything right. This could be..."

"We could find Colonel Fortini's mother, if she's still alive that is and ask her," Gayle piped up, cutting across Father Alba, who seemed to be trying to talk himself out of even making the attempt at the exorcism.

"I tried," the priest said in a small voice. "She wasn't in the phone book."

William was looking at the priest, shaking his head. "Look Father, could I do the exorcism? Do you have it written somewhere in English?"

"No. You said yourself, you don't even believe in God."

"Then I'll do it!" Will cried angrily. "I believe in God and... in the devil... now."

"No you couldn't do it either. It takes someone much older and wiser to deal with a demon. The demon would treat you like a toy and only play around before it devoured you. I'm not saying I won't do it... I'm just..." he trailed with his thought unfinished.

William adopted a patient tone with the fearful priest, "Father, I have friends in the FBI. They may be able to find this lady pretty quickly. Most people can be found in a matter of hours if they aren't actively hiding. All I'm asking is that we talk to her and see what really happened and we make our decision from there."

The priest was shaking his head to say no but instead said, "I'll at least listen to her, but..."

"Is there another priest we can get who does exorcisms?" Gayle asked hopefully.

"Yes, but it's almost a waste of time even asking. Ever since the Exorcist movies there are a thousand calls per year for exorcisms and almost all fakes or people on

the verge of insanity. We would need proof—hard proof in hand before we applied to the Cardinal to send out an Exorcist. Even then it could take days or weeks just to get him out here. You see, nobody wants to be associated with this sort of thing. But, like I said if you find her, I'll go talk with Mrs. Fortini and see what she has to say. I can do that and maybe more."

"Well, we have the beginnings of a plan then," William said trying to sound upbeat.

"I have to go," Father Alba said, but at the instant hard look the Commander gave him, he added, "To pray... in the waiting room. I need to prepare myself. Just in case."

"Certainly Father, do what you need to do." Gayle responded seeking to hit an understanding note. He left in a hurry. Will didn't think highly of their chances if an exorcism was needed.

"You two are taking a lot on faith," Gayle said giving Brian and Lisa a look.

"I'm not," Brian said, with his usual confidence. "Let me show you." He walked from the room, and was back in seconds carrying a brown bag. From it, he pulled what looked to be an old towel which he gingerly unwrapped, as if afraid to touch what was in it. When he was done, the hilt of the Commander's sword lay on in the towel for all to see.

What was left of the blade was blackened as if it had been pulled from a fire and was jagged and sharp. The gilded pommel and guard were tarnished with age and only the gold braid that wound around the grip retained any of its original color.

Will stepped forward to look more closely but Brian waved him back. "Don't touch it! It's nasty and cold like you can't believe. When I got back from the Harris', I saw this sitting against the curb. Here do this, Will." He put his hand over the top of the sword, but kept it an inch away. "You can still feel the cold!"

Will put out his hand and his eyes flew open in shock. The cold emanated from it like a physical force. They each took turns and when they were done, Brian rewrapped it with the same caution he had shown unwrapping it. "It's defying physics on so many levels, I wish Tal..." He stopped in midsentence, his face clouding over and he began to blink rapidly.

Gayle reached out with her good hand and patted him on the arm. "Yes, this is the kind of puzzle Talitha would enjoy, well maybe not enjoy but she'd figure it out. I know it."

"Hey anybody! I gotta pee!" Katie yelled from across the hall—Lisa dashed out of the room.

Gayle smiled but it was fleeting. She checked the clock on the wall. "Quarter to seven...is there going to be anyone working at the FBI now?"

William appeared a few steps beyond exhaustion and he blinked up at her dully for a second. "What? Oh yeah... there are always agents on duty. Will, please hand me that phone." He made the call, but it seemed tedious and William appeared to be fading with each question answered. When he finally hung up, he was asleep before he had handed the phone back to his son, and it plopped onto the bed.

Unfortunately, his nap was only an hour long due to the quick response from the FBI. The agents had compiled a list of four possible names, the most likely of which was an eighty-nine-year-old woman named Adrina Fortini. She lived in Queens not more than thirty minutes away by subway.

Commander Jern, still looking half-asleep took a great breath and pulled off the leads to his monitors; these immediately went crazy with shrill alarms. He then casually pulled out his IV and left it dangling dripping clear fluids.

"William! What are you doing?" Gayle started to protest.

"I have to go, honey. This is Talitha's life. I won't trust it to anybody else. Will, please hand me my clothes... there in that plastic bag."

"But what about your life? You could have another heart attack." Gayle's voice was full of concern for her husband.

"Just like you, I'd give up my life for our children. Now I promise to stay in the wheelchair. Ok?" She nodded sadly.

He struggled into his pants and Brian, who politely faced away, mentioned as if in passing, "I will be going, too."

"You know I can't allow that," the Commander said.

"I'm sorry sir, but it's not up to you. I saw the address and I'll either go with you or meet you there." The two looked at each other sternly.

William was just too tired to put up much of a struggle. "Officially you can't come with us. But go say goodbye to Talitha and get back over here pronto."

"Yes sir," Brian ran from the room.

Within ten minutes, they said their goodbyes, signed a release form, handed reluctantly to William by a cranky doctor, collected the priest, and left the hospital.

5

The warm June night was beautiful. It was one of those magical nights when kids played well into the dark, screaming with laughter, and everyone but Father Alba felt better.

He had undergone such a dramatic personality change that it astounded Will. Gone was the peppy man who was always so quick to laugh, and in his place was a dour, pessimistic crank.

Will's father started well, pushed gently by Brian under the pretty oak trees, but soon his head lolled to the side as he strayed into slumber. He wavered in and out of sleep throughout the ferry ride and the short subway trip into Queens. Even though he was doing almost nothing, Will feared greatly that his father was over doing it. He kept a close eye on the man and demanded that he be left alone as much as possible, and so the Commander missed much of the uneventful trip.

Adrina's building didn't have an elevator and she lived four stories up. Will considered attempting to carry his father, but William was simply too large. It wasn't just his height; he had the build of a linebacker. When Will woke him up, it took his father a few moments to figure out where he was. William's ashen face went greyer still, when he heard the news that there was no elevator.

With dreadful slowness, William ascended the stairs, clutching at the railing for support. Each step seemed to take forever and his eyes were half-closed and unfocussed. Near the top, he swayed alarmingly, his breath coming in short gasps, and Brian was just in time with the wheelchair, sliding it under him as he collapsed.

Will felt strangely nervous about meeting the old lady. It would probably be nothing but a quick conversation yet his heart told him it was going to be more. He had laughed off Lisa's warning to be careful, when he had kissed her goodbye less than an hour before.

"Be careful? She's like a million years old. I think I can take her if we get into a fight and if not, I'm pretty sure I could out run her." It had seemed like a joke then, but at the moment he was not so certain. A glance at the priest told him he wasn't alone in that uncertainty; the man was tugging almost constantly on the tight collar about his neck.

Brian pushed William to the door where William hauled himself up out of the chair with his son's help. Not waiting for his father to knock, Will rapped hard on the door. It seemed very loud in the quiet of the corridor and they all waited silently with an air of expectation hanging about them.

Thirty seconds came and went and just when Will was starting to get angry at the look of relief on the priest's face, there came an almost imperceptible sound of metal sliding on metal. Slowly the doorknob turned and a very small, wizened old lady peered out from a six-inch gap in the doorway. Her hair and skin were a nearly uniform snowy white but her eyes still held their color. They also held a fear that had long passed into terror.

Will's father drew in a tired breath and said as loud as he could: "Hello! Are you Adrina Fortini? We're looking for the mother of Colonel Tomas Fortini..."

She stared at him aghast: her mouth slightly open, her dentures hanging loosely from her upper gums, looking too fake and too large. The stare didn't last long. She interrupted William by shrieking in absolute horror and attempted to slam the door in their faces by throwing what was likely all eighty pounds of herself against it. William pushed back as well as he was able, but he was so weak that the old lady began to win the pathetic battle. Feeling embarrassed for his father, Will gently reached out—so as not to knock the lady over—and pushed the door slowly open.

"No!" she shrieked. "No! Not like this! Not like this!" She turned away from them, her face almost comical in its terrible fear and instead of running as Will thought she would do, she fell to her hands and threw up in a great heaving retch. She spewed out some more and this time her dentures came out too. Will stood staring at the sight, stunned by what was happening and missed his father fainting backwards only to be caught by an alert Brian.

"Mrs. Fortini? It's ok, we won't hurt you," Will tried to sound as sweet as he could.

"No God! Please no. Please no," she moaned to the floor, her head shaking back and forth with a long string of saliva and vomit swinging from her chin.

Will bent down and touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Mrs. Fortini..."

"Oh, God!" She reached back with one hand clutching her bottom, and then scrambled up, hurrying to the bathroom. She hadn't been quick enough, however and Will's face wrinkled in disgust at the powerful stench of concentrated urine, that only the very old seem able to produce.

He waved the others into the apartment and they all stood about in mute embarrassment looking at the aging decor and the fading pictures. Will went to the kitchen, grabbed some paper towels and cleaned up the mess Adrina had made as

best as he could, including rinsing out the dentures. These he left on the old wood kitchen table that looked as aged and worn as the lady herself.

The water ran in the bathroom for a few minutes and then Adrina came out and simply said, "Excuse me," before stepping into what looked to be her bedroom. Five minutes later, she came out wearing a different black dress and a black cardigan. She paused in the doorway and looked at each of them in turn. There was no sign of shame on her wrinkled features, nor was there any evidence of the stark terror she'd exhibited. Adrina came across in fact, to be defiant as if they had done something other than knock on her door.

"You asked about Tomas? I am his mother. I know why you're here," she added, cryptically. Her voice sounded slightly mushy-sounding.

"Mrs. Fortini, your dentures are right over here. I rinsed them off for you." Will indicated the paper towel on the table. When she looked at it, her defiance seemed to wilt slightly.

Breathing a large sigh, she went over to the table and with a shy girlishness, she turned away and put them in her mouth. The old lady sucked on them as quietly as she could and then, facing the four strange men in her apartment, said with a slight accent that Will couldn't place, "The demon, it's back, correct?"

Will's father, who had been slipping into almost a stupor, seemed roused by the statement. "How did you know?"

"Because I know," she said sharply. She walked among them, touching them lightly, placing the flat of her hand to their chests. Will was surprised when she spoke next, because her voice was filled with anger. "This is what I have to work with? I have to..." She stopped in midsentence and looked at Will. "You..."

"My name is Will Jern, Mrs. Fortini."

"A boy in a man's body! You're too afraid! In order to be a man you must be able to cast aside your fear and make the tough choices." Will began to protest but stopped when he realized she was right.

"And you are a military man of course," she murmured to Will's father.

"I'm Commander William Jern of the United States Coast Guard."

"Yes and one day you wish to be captain, no?" She paused and he simply stared at her. "Captain of your soul perhaps, or do you think that already?" This wasn't a rhetorical question; she seemed to want an answer from him.

William looked tired but also slightly cross. "I am Captain of my soul."

With a sad shake of her head she patted him on the arm. "No, you're not. Even with your head bloodied by the looming horror of the shade, you are still an unbeliever. Only those who choose to ignore God believe they are masters of their own souls. It is those of us who have faith in the Lord who know that God is master of all things."

"Master of the demon as well?" William asked with a touch of vehemence.

"Yes, even master of the demon." She turned to Father Alba and said, "I would have you ask your friend the Priest about this, but he's even worse off than you." The tiny lady advanced on the plump man and he shrank back. "You profess to believe in an all-powerful God, yet you reek of fear. Great faith cannot walk hand in hand with such great fear." His face grew angry at the words, but the truth in them was undeniable, and he could only sputter impotently for a moment before looking away.

"And finally you bring this... what do they call the young ones? A cub-scout?" She touched Brian as well, looked into his eyes, and gave another sad shake of her head. "You hide your fear better than others but it's still there, lurking and undermining your confidence, isn't it... um?"

"Brian Galt... and, yes I'm afraid, but I'm tougher than I look."

"Oh yes, much tougher and confident too. Confident that you can overcome anything. But these won't be enough to save you or to stop the demon... but..."

"But what, Mrs. Fortini?" Brian leaned in to hear.

"But, maybe your love will. You three," she indicated the Jerns and Brian. "You love the same girl, a girl that the demon now owns. Maybe your love will be enough."

Will felt suddenly hopeful. "You mean we can fight the demon with love?"

He was immediately embarrassed, when she cackled a long harsh laugh that turned into a hacking wet cough. "Love. Ha! *It* feeds on love and happiness and life. The demon has none of these things of its own and desires them greatly. At the same time, it hates them with an even greater passion. No, love won't destroy the shade, but it may keep you alive and it may keep you going when..." she stopped talking suddenly and Will was secretly glad she hadn't finished the sentence.

His father looked at her keenly from his wheelchair. "Mrs. Fortini, can you please tell me how you know all of this?"

"I am Gypsy," she said simply.

The four looked at each other skeptically and William retorted, "I'm afraid that doesn't clarify much."

"I am Gypsy, that is that," she said again acting as though it should be enough of an answer.

"Ooookay," William said. "Could you please elaborate? Are you a mind reader? Do you have a crystal ball?"

A laugh barked out of her and she coughed some more. "Crystal ball, ha! You are funny, Mr. Commander. The crystal ball is for the rubes and the cons. You don't know Gypsy?" she asked looking at each. "I'll tell you briefly, ok? Where to start...the word gypsy, it comes from the name of the land Egypt. You see? But the Gypsies, we did not come from there, we came from what is now northern India. In the days of Abraham and Jacob, the Gypsies were wanderers of sorts, but always they go to the same locations, you understand?"

"They were semi-nomadic. We understand," William answered easily, his fatigue forgotten in his curiosity.

"So there came the great famine, that so afflicted the Jews of the bible, it was a real thing you know. The Jews all migrated to the land of Egypt and soon after the gypsies came as well. Over time the Pharaohs enslaved the two groups and there was great rivalry between them. The Jews worshiped Yahweh or Jehovah as they later called God. The Gypsies were pagans, but turned to worshipping the false god Ba'al Zabel, to spite the Jews. Ba'al was a demon prince and demanded the sacrifice of children and thousands were burned alive to appease the creature."

She paused and her body gave a little shudder. "Then in the time of Moses, the Gypsies pretended to turn from Ba'al and they fled Egypt with the Jews, and it was to the semi-nomadic Gypsies that the Jews turned to for help. Forty years

they wandered in the desert, and that was partly due to Ba'al and the Gypsies who wished to keep them astray. During that time, many Jews were converted and committed unspeakable acts. It was the Gypsies that pushed the Jews to rebel at the waters in the Desert of Zin. In return, God punished the Gypsies by showing them Ba'al Zubeil's true nature; they were cursed by the sight and all their children were cursed as well."

She stopped momentarily and took a long, wheezy breath. "The legacy of the curse lives on to this day. Every Gypsy carries it about in them. Like all things, it is stronger in some than in others."

Commander Jern looked skeptical. "A Gypsy curse? Is that why the demon is here? A Gypsy did this? Is this demon, Ba'al?" The others nodded along at the questions.

"First, I don't know why the demon is back and I don't know if it is Ba'al," Adrina answered. "I do know that it's an ancient and powerful shade called forth by a Gypsy."

Brian looked interested and asked, "When you say, shade, is that the same thing as a demon?" Adrina nodded solemnly. After a quick look at the others, Brian asked a second question, "You said the demon was back. How do you know the thing at the Jern's home is the same demon?"

"I feel it on these two... especially the Commander. It's the same alright."

"Perhaps I'm misunderstanding the term curse," William added cautiously. "But you seem ok."

"I'm cursed with clairvoyance and foresight... I can sometimes see or know when things are going to happen or that have already happened. Like..." she trailed off and her mouth went slack. After another shiver, she continued. "Like I knew you were here about the demon." She coughed again and went on, "It's not what you think, I don't get the winning lottery numbers, or who'll win the World Series. It's never a good thing. There always has to be pain associated with it."

"As far as a curse goes, that still doesn't sound that bad," Father Alba put in.

"It doesn't sound that bad because you've not lived it! I see terrible things but I can't do anything about them. If I ever try to change what I know is going to happen, I make it worse. When I was much, much younger I owned a cat, she was so sweet... anyway one day I had a vision that she'd be killed by a hunter who would shoot her, mistaking her for a rabbit. I loved that cat so much... and this was before I fully understood the ramifications of my curse, so I decided to keep her in all day. She kept prowling about moodily until I decided to go to the cellar to get some peaches. As I opened the door, she shot under my foot and I stepped down on her and broke her back."

She paused and coughed her cough. "I fell down the stairs and broke my wrist and the cat crawled off howling in pain. Somehow she got wedged under the house where I couldn't get to her and it was two days of screaming and moaning before she finally died."

Father Alba looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"And that's only a little thing! It's far worse if I ever *try* to look into the future."

"What happens then?" Will's voice was a hushed whisper.

"Pain... always pain and death. And I get guilt too as a bonus for causing it."

"So if you see something involuntarily and you don't do anything about it then no one gets hurt... I mean nothing more will happen?" Will asked.

"Yes that's right," she replied ruefully. "Then I'm the only one who gets to enjoy it. When my husband passed away, I knew from the moment I woke up, that he would die that day. I didn't know when or even how, only that he was to die... this is the demon's sick joke you see. I couldn't say or do anything that would let on that I knew. I walked about the entire day with a great big fake smile on my face, while inside my chest hurt so bad... I was so afraid that by doing anything I would cause him more pain or misery."

She paused again and her eyes were wet now. "He finally had a heart attack. It was after dinner and I still didn't know what to do. I worried that by calling an ambulance it'd get worse somehow and I was forced to sit there and watch, as he crawled about in pain, begging for help. He took a long time to die." She stopped talking and stared at the beat up wood table.

Will was aghast at the idea of having to watch someone die like that without the power to help in any way. "I think it sounds awful. It seems so unfair to be born with this curse."

She shook her head slowly as if to clear it of the awful memory. "Fair? Life is not fair. But you... look at you! You should be happy life isn't fair. Look how big and handsome you are. If life were fair we would all look the same, think the same, be the same, and the world would be boring. No, Will. I hate my curse and sometimes I hate myself, but life is the way the Lord made it and who am I to complain?"

William cleared his throat and asked, "Mrs. Fortini, can someone cursed like this, call or summon a demon? You would think there would be a lot more of them running about if they could."

"No, this is something else, witchcraft perhaps. I know it's a Gypsy; the scent is all over you. How she managed to call a demon, I don't know." She sat down in one of her shaky wooden chairs. "Perhaps if you told me your story, I could figure something out."

Will looked to his father to proceed, but the man appeared haggard in his exhaustion, so he told the story. It was nearly identical to the one the Commander had told the priest only two hours before. The old lady seemed exceptionally keen to Will and he felt she could almost see inside him at times. When he was done, she sat back thoughtfully and except for the wheeze in her breath, she was silent.

After a minute, however Adrina began to pepper him with questions:

"Was there anyone else in the house last night?"

"Not that I know of," he replied with a look to his father, who shrugged.

"Does your sister own a Ouija board, or know anyone that does?"

"We don't have one... and I don't know anyone who does."

"What about witches? Is she friends with any?"

"Real witches?" Will asked incredulously.

"Real or phony, either one."

"No," he said with a laugh.

"What about enemies? Do you know anyone that hates her or was intensely jealous of her?"

Will shook his head, but Brian spoke up, "There's Doug; she's always ripping him apart."

"No! It has to be a girl, the curse runs strongest through our women."

"I don't think so, she really is very nice."

Adrina put her face in her bony little hands and rubbed at her eyes. "We'll need to find the witch if we're going to help your Talitha."

"We?" William began. "Mrs. Fortini, we came here just to ask you a few questions concerning what happened to your son and granddaughter. We're looking for information about the exorcism that Father Menning performed. Can you tell us what he did wrong?"

"That's funny..." She cackled her old lady cackle and her dentures slipped down as she did. "What he did wrong! He didn't really do anything wrong, he just wasn't prepared and he didn't... I should say *we* didn't know."

"Know what?" William asked and they all leaned in towards her.

She breathed a tired sigh and the phlegm rattled loosely in her lungs. She told them of the night twenty-one years before. It was a long story with frequent hacking coughs but the four men listened with rapt attention. She told of how her granddaughter Emily had, out of the blue, been possessed or at least that is what they thought at the time. And the similarities between her story and theirs were glaring; from the cold deep coma and the nasty feeling of her touch, to the description of the demon.

"Your Talitha, she was virgin, yes?" Adrina asked.

Everyone looked at Brian, who blushed mightily and said with a complete lack of his usual confidence, "Ah... we, ah yeah, she was a, you know... a virgin."

Adrina nodded expecting this. "Emily was one as well. That was part of the reason I was thinking it was an exorcism that needed to be performed. A virgin is the perfect receptacle for a demon."

At this statement Father Alba, small, pudgy, balding, and sweating hugely despite the coolness of the air-conditioned apartment, began to interrogate the old lady with questions concerning the exorcism. To Will, her memory of the night so long ago, was astounding, especially for someone her age. She rattled off answers to the oddest questions, some concerning Father Menning's attire, some concerning the order in which he did things or said things and Will was quickly lost. The priest kept at it though, until Adrina became angry.

"I answered that already... twice! I tell you, he went by the book. He did not make a mistake!"

"And I'm telling you, Mrs. Fortini that unless you've been to the seminary, you're unlikely to know the differences between certain of the rites."

"In this case, you're wrong Father, I said..."

He interrupted loudly, "Tell me! Tell me! How am I wrong? Did you attend the seminary?"

"No, but I've been present at four other exorcisms and this was exactly like the others..."

With exaggerated incredulity, he interrupted again, "Four exorcisms? Four?"

"Yes, Father. It is sad, but true."

"I don't believe you." Father Alba said angrily.

"Stop it right now." William demanded coldly from his wheelchair. "Mrs. Fortini, why do you think the exorcism failed if it was done correctly?"

"I think..." she paused a long time, which seemed odd to Will after she was able to shoot out answers so quickly before. "I think it is because we performed it on the wrong girl. Remember I told you about the girl who was supposed to spend the night with Emily, but who ran out of the house? I think she was the witch and it was she, we should have done it to."

"But that doesn't make any sense," said Father Alba irately. "There's no literature anywhere that states that two people can be possessed by the same demon at the same time."

Adrina nodded her head. "You're correct Father, however when it comes to demons and their capabilities we know almost nothing."

William rubbed his eyes in a tired fashion. "Nobody knows much about demons—that's just great! How about this, we know that both Emily and Talitha were virgins, is it possible that they were maybe sacrificed to Ba'al or another demon, like you mentioned earlier? Would their virginity be a contributing factor?"

She was nodding her head excitedly even before he had finished his sentence. "Yes! Yes... damn it! I always assumed it was a possession gone wrong and that was why..." She suddenly quit speaking midsentence, got up and walked to the refrigerator. She peered in for a moment and the appliance light turned her skin almost translucent. Will could see the veins of her forehead standing out and an artery jumping at her temple.

"Uh, what would a Gypsy or a... you know a witch hope to get from sacrificing Talitha? To get rich or powerful?" Will asked hoping he wouldn't sound stupid.

Adrina shut the door and looked back at him with a grim smile covering her face. "Whatever she gets out of it, I can tell you, is not what she was expecting. A demon will twist your words around so they are beyond recognition. Ask to never die, or to stay young forever and chances are you'll end up in a block of ice for eternity. Ask to be beautiful and the demon might grant it but make it so that only you see the beauty and everyone else sees a hag. It would be that sort of thing." There was silence as they considered the ramifications of dealing with a demon.

"The Gypsy, is it likely the same person who did it to Emily?" William asked. "Would this person have to live nearby? I mean should we be looking for someone who lives on the island? If it's the whole of New York, we may never find her."

"More than likely yes to the first question, the demon is the same, the house is the same, the coma is the same, everything is too similar. It's very likely the same Gypsy using the same incantation. Now for where she lives, it is likely she lives on the island or has access to it."

"What do we do if we can't find the girl? And what do we do if we can?" the priest asked, ineffectively hiding his anxiety over the second possibility. "I mean the exorcism didn't work the last time and people died needlessly."

"We'll find her..." Adrina started to say but the priest cut across her.

"How do you know? Maybe we'll get the wrong girl."

A terrible thought occurred to Will then. "Don't answer that! It might affect things. You saw something when we first walked in and... it looked pretty bad. I don't want it to get worse for you."

"Thank you. That is sweet of you to think of me like that." Adrina smiled genuinely, a large fake-toothed smile, and Will seeing those over-sized dentures in her small wrinkled head was instantly reminded of a human shark. She added to

the priest, "Don't worry we'll find the right girl, or I should say woman. She will have grown up by now. You'll perform an exorcism on her."

The priest glanced around at the others and Will could see the fear plainly all over his features and Adrina did too. "You won't have to worry, Father. The demon will be preoccupied with us. In fact, you won't have to set one foot in the house, as long as the witch is in the doorway this will work."

Will's father wanted to mollify the priest as well. "It's true, the demon can't seem to come out of the house. However, Mrs. Fortini, I don't want you to come with us. I'm sorry, but your power...or curse will either be useless, since you can't do anything about whatever you might see, or it will make things worse and we can't afford that."

"Excuse me, Mr. Jern?" Brian raised his hand as if he were still in school. "If we believe Mrs. Fortini about the curse, then logically we must bring her along. She obviously saw something connected to the demon and therefore, if we keep her from fulfilling her destiny, we will logically make it harder if not impossible for us."

"There are two problems with that Brian." the Commander said. "First, we know that things will be worse for her but not necessarily for us and..."

Will raised his hand too, but then not waiting to be called on, interrupted saying, "I know who it is, Dad." While the conversation had been flowing around him, Will had been only half-listening. He'd been going over his list of suspects, which included every woman on the island that was close to his mom's age: 36-42.

The face that came almost immediately to mind was that of Mrs. Harris, their next-door neighbor. It was partly due to her black hair and dark eyes, which his mind had stereotyped as "Gypsy" but it was also her odd behavior in the dark the other night. But since she was much younger than his mom was and would've been around ten year-old at the time of the first possession twenty-one years before he had discarded her from the list.

The fact that Talitha was a virgin *and* that it had to be known by the witch, limited the number of suspects to her friend's parents and maybe her doctor. There were a few mothers that fit in the age group, but they all seemed... normal, and none of them had ever appeared to take any extraordinary interest in his sister. The only one who had had been, was once again Mrs. Harris. But again there was simply nothing out of the ordinary about her, apart from her beauty and the fact that she must have married really young to have...

"I know who the witch is, Dad. It's Mrs. Harris, she... she was very interested in Talitha... ah sexually," he couldn't help it and cast a quick look at Brian when he said it. "She talked to me the other night... asking me to look out for her virtues." It all seemed so clear to him suddenly. "And remember how she kinda despised the Nelsons, and she said how their daughter was such a slut? Maybe she wanted to sacrifice Jen Nelson but couldn't because she wasn't a virgin, so..."

William looked skeptical. "So she poisoned Mrs. Nelson? There's no way."

"What about that ridiculous husband of hers!" Will turned to Adrina with excitement. "This lady, Mrs. Harris is... beautiful and you know super sexy," Will paused and blushed, feeling weird saying this to a lady as old as his grandmother. "But her husband is so... boring and ugly. I was just thinking what a cosmic joke the two of them were... you see?"

She nodded her head in understanding. "Is there more?"

"Yes, two nights ago she was outside our house wearing nothing but...uh I mean she was out there talking about how close it was to the full moon. Does the moon being full have any meaning?"

"Yes, but not the way you would think. It's an internal thing that..."

William interrupted, "I'm sorry, but I don't think it's her. I've known Greg off and on for years and Henny too. She could've done this back when we lived in South Carolina, why would she have waited until now?"

"Both time and place are equally important... I don't know why so don't ask," she said at Will's look of curiosity. "It's the house itself that posed the opportunity, this I'm sure. Twenty-one years ago, it had already been stained with blood, old blood. The weird visions you witnessed, the feeling of unease, the cold, these are signs that the house is on a fault...a weak point between worlds."

Will's father was still shaking his head. "Great, a fault! But... Henny? Sure she's sexy, but we don't know what Greg was like when they were younger, maybe he was more... manly."

"I doubt it, Dad." Will said bluntly. "But her sexiness is also part of it. When I see her I want her, but I'm also repulsed by her, she seems so skanky. I discounted her at first because of her age but then I realized, she only *looks* young. She's the same age as mom." William nodded his head in agreement and Will went on, "And remember how she took such an interest in Talitha when we were at dinner?"

"You were at the witch's house?" Adrina seemed alarmed by this. "Did she ask for anything of Talitha's? Did she take anything of hers?"

Will considered this but couldn't think of anything. "I'm pretty sure she didn't, I was with Talitha the entire time."

"Her hair, damn it!" William seemed to come alive and grow stronger in his anger. He told Adrina about the makeup room and the new brush that seemed out of place. "It's her, you're right Will, it's her. But what do we do now? I don't think we can just grab her and force her into the house?"

Will felt a sudden rush of hot anger. "I say yes! Knock her out cold if we have to. She has already got what she wanted from this. She's rich, now that the admiral is on his death bed."

"No," Adrina stated after a pause. "We tell her exactly what we intend to do. An exorcism on her will break the connection the demon has to this world, and if it was money she was after and she already has it, then she will likely want to go through with it."

Still flush with the energy of his anger, Will stood and paced. "So Father Alba does the exorcism, while the four of us go find..."

From his wheelchair, William shook his head. "No. I can't let you near that thing again, or you Brian."

"It won't be enough, Commander." Adrina suddenly appeared more grey in the face than white. "The boys will have to come... I know," she added cryptically. The fire of Will's anger was immediately smothered by the way she had said *I know*. There was a finality to it that sent a cold chill down his spine. She knew... what? Did something happen to him? To his dad? He was bursting with the need to ask her what she had seen, and was so preoccupied that he nearly missed her next question. "You are both virgins, am I right?"

The two boys turned pink in the cheeks and red in the ears, and each glanced at the other hoping each would answer first. Brian, whose eyes seemed extremely large at the moment answered in a quiet voice, "Yes... I'm a virgin."

Bolstered by his friend's words, Will stated with some confidence, "I am also." Brian gave him a sharp look, which Will returned only briefly, but then turned his eyes down to the worn table. He drew in a quick breath of embarrassment a moment later.

"You two boys aren't *homos* are you? Because it will be worse if you are." Adrina said and she eyed them appraisingly. Again, they looked at each other before shaking their heads in unison.

"No ma'am," Brian said to her, but then turned in his chair, which teetered on its uneven legs and looked steadily at Will. "It may be important, Will. Tell the truth, you're not a virgin."

"Wait, not a homo virgin, or a regular virgin?" Adrina asked in surprise.

If Will's cheeks had been pink before they were apple red now. "Neither! I mean... it was... uh..." he found he could not discuss the topic in front an old lady, his priest, and his dad. He had wanted to say it had been close, but that would have been an understatement when he thought back to the night with Amy Harris.

6

Amy had been all over him in that bedroom at Carlos' house, and his body had responded with irrepressible eagerness. However, his insides were a maelstrom of thoughts and emotions, all of which had been thrown into an uninterpretable mess by the tremendous amount of beer in which he had drowned himself. The battle over which would control him, his body, his mind or the beer, would've been close had it not been for Amy's practiced hands.

She had him out of his clothes so quickly that there had been no time to protest. Moreover, he didn't think it would have made any difference if he had protested for she had a velvet grip on him that left no room for doubt as to where this was heading.

His mind had capitulated to the inevitable and there wasn't enough beer in the world that could have stopped his seventeen-year-old body at that point. But he had stopped. He had been poised to enter, when Amy lied.

"I saved myself for you," she had said, huskily. It was probably the only thing, short of his mother walking in, that could have stopped him at that moment. It was the most blatant stupid lie he had ever heard, and he leaned back away from her, the dark hiding what would have been an insulting look of incredulity.

'What did that slut just say?' he asked himself and his ardor slipped momentarily.

"What's wrong?" she had asked, but hadn't waited for an answer and those expert hands had gripped him again. She had a magical touch and in a flash, his body raring to go again, but his mind honed in on a stray thought: *Lisa truly has saved herself for me.*

In fact, her words, 'I only have one thing left to give,' came back to him and held him in a grip greater than Amy's. All he had to do was love Lisa without

reservation and she would give herself to him completely. For just long enough to slip away from Amy, get dressed and leave, he focused on the fact that he loved Lisa.

It was because of his love for Lisa, that he was still a virgin. Just the previous night, before he knew about the demon, he was on the verge of having sex with Lisa, when he heard his own advice to Talitha echo through his head, *Demand that he make it perfect for you*. What he and Lisa were doing was far from perfect. She saw it as a necessity, a chore to be performed to keep him from straying.

He had stopped her gently and asked, "Is this how you imagined it would be?"

She had laughed a bitter laugh. "No."

"Lisa, I want us to be forever. Do you see... If we do this now, this way, we will look back *forever* and see it as a mistake. I know very little in life is perfect but I want our love to be as perfect as it can be." She had stopped her frantic motions and had looked at him in that calm way of hers. They looked into each other's eyes and Will knew they were good again...in fact, he knew they were better. His desire for her swept over him and, despite his fancy words, it was all he could do not to take her right there and then.

Standing in the kitchen of the strange apartment, Will had paused as the two memories drifted through his mind. When he realized that the room had become silent, he looked up to see faces staring at him expectantly. His ears burned hotly, but he tried to hide his embarrassment by sounding confident.

"Despite the rumors, Brian, I'm still a virgin. But... but what does that have to do with anything."

Adrina was nodding and looking with keen interest into Will's face and he wondered again if she had seen into him. His ears felt ablaze and, self-consciously he touched them.

"Against the demon, there is very little protecting us: Faith in God, purity of the soul and strength of mind. This is all we have!" she said forcefully. "And it will not be enough. That Mr. Commander is why we need the boys to come. Two of us will not be enough... even four may not be enough."

"If we have come to fight, we are far too few; if we have come to die, we are far too many," Will's father quoted softly. "I can't remember who said that. Isn't that strange? I could... I could get more men. Mrs. Fortini. Would that help?"

"No, the demon would simply slip into the shadows... not in fear but in cunning. And there is little time left to save your Talitha." She gave a small cough. "We must face it ourselves, tonight. But keep in mind, we are not alone... we have God on our side." She paused again, before saying in a tired voice, "It will come for me first... or I should say, I will challenge it first. I'll hold out as long as I can, but it won't be very long. That is why you have to be quick!" she added, looking at them.

"The boys... they're just boys." William said, his eyes meandering around the rough surface of the scarred table.

"I'll go and I'll be as quick as I need to be...just tell me what I have to do," Brian declared.

"I'll go too...I love Talitha." Will spoke firmly, trying to appear as strong as Brian.

William smiled at his son. "I was wrong; you two are men and I think I'll need you, perhaps desperately so. But..." He turned and looked directly into the old lady's black eyes. "But you, I don't know if I can trust you. I'm sorry but I need to

be blunt. Before I agree to you coming along, I need to know two things: how did your son die? And perhaps more importantly, how did you live?"

Chapter 11

**William and Adrina.
June 5th, 1980**

1

William had known the old lady was holding something back. Perhaps it wasn't a total lie, but there was something... something disingenuous in her story. She had glossed over the death of the priest and failed completely to mention how her son had ended up with a bullet in his brain.

"Finish telling us what happened twenty-one years ago. The exorcism failed you say and the demon looked at the priest..."

Everyone turned to Adrina expectantly. "Yes the demon let me go. I had been falling apart and the demon likes it when you're fresh, more aware. It was such a relief! Either way it was at the priest... ripping into his mind. It was doing something to him, hurting, or punishing him. I knew that it was different from what it had done to me and it was awful to see. I tried not to look but I couldn't seem to help it. I couldn't pull my eyes off of..."

She paused gazing off out of the window of her apartment. Her mouth hung agape and William was repulsed by the stale denture smell wafting out of it. He turned his glance to the others and saw that Father Alba was pale, a sick whitish green color; absently, he chewed at the skin of lip.

Adrina started again, so suddenly that William gave a little jump in his wheelchair. "But... but time was running out and so were our options. Tomas expected me to figure something out, but I couldn't think clearly what with the demon so close and Father..." She cast a nervous glance at Father Alba.

"And Father, what? What happened to him?" Alba was clearly nervous and the fear caused his voice to become strident and angry.

"That's just it. I don't know what the demon was doing to him. He started screaming: *It's not my fault!* But that wasn't the worst; he began clawing at his eyes." She swallowed hard for a moment. "And then, and then he fell to the floor and the blood... it ran from where his eyes used to be... two streams of blood just poured from those gaping holes. Then the screaming stopped and it looked like he was choking. On what, I don't know, but he turned a wild shade of red, and..."

Father Alba broke in, demanding harshly, "Did you try to save him?" Adrina had been telling the story while staring off and she didn't seem to hear, but her head moved back and forth gently. Father Alba's tone became superior at the denial, "You just let him choke to death, didn't you? You let him die. Why? So you could run away?"

"Yes I let him die. It's true. But I didn't run... I couldn't. I wanted to so badly, but I was weak from the demon; I could barely stand. I tried to use the time to..."

"Use the time? You mean you used his death! You sacrificed him is what you did. You gave him to the fiend in return for what?" Alba's nervousness had been replaced by self-righteous denunciation.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Adrina replied quietly. "I sacrificed no one. The demon can kill quite easily without my help. I just used the time..." She sighed another rattling sigh, "I used the time just like you three will use the time I give you."

Father Alba deflated at the thought, and William saw that the priest wasn't ready for what lay ahead of them. He worried that the man might become dangerous in his fear.

"How did you use the time, Mrs. Fortini?"

"I uh... I told my son to run but he couldn't hear me, I guess." She looked at William with eyes that were heavy with guilt. It was apparent that she was lying again and his eyes narrowed in anger.

She didn't seem to notice. "It was just that we were out of time and there was nothing I could do. So... I looked for the answer, the Knowing if you understand me."

"But you shouldn't have," Will blurted out. "You said there would always be price to pay."

"Yes I did, didn't I? There was a price and I paid it... or at least I thought I had." Her body was racked by a great rolling shiver. It reminded William of the extreme reaction she'd had when they had first entered. Although he was perversely curious about it, he thought it wiser not to ask.

Instead he asked, "What did the 'knowing' show you?"

Tears sprang from her eyes, raced through the valleys of her wrinkles, and dripped down her chin with the regularity of a broken faucet. She tried to form words, but with her eyes seeing a time far away, it took a long time to spit out: "Emily had to be killed."

There was a long silence and William leaned back in his chair, and for a moment, his exhaustion was so overwhelming that he knew if he closed his eyes he would fall asleep again right there.

"She can't be trusted!" Father Alba spoke loudly and without warning. Everyone jumped except for Adrina who was still crying. "Not only did she sacrifice the priest to save herself, but she killed her own granddaughter as well! And! And I think it's safe to say that she killed her own son! What do you say to that?" He asked this with a snap of his fingers in her face.

Adrina sat staring straight ahead, as if he hadn't said anything. But then she did answer him in a quiet voice that stopped and started at odd intervals, "You're right... I shot him. But, it's not how it sounds. I didn't ask for this, I didn't want...any part of it. The priest... he was choking from the inside. I couldn't help him. I knew he would be dead soon... and I knew I would be..." She trailed off. Her eyes were dry now, unblinking and staring far away.

"You knew you would be next, right Mrs. Fortini?" Will prompted and his father was amazed at the compassion in the boy's voice.

Adrina seemed to hear it also and a smile that didn't touch her eyes slipped across her face. "Yes, you understand don't you? I was going to be next and Tomas would then try to get Emily out of the house. That's the way it should've happened. But we were up in the attic and he would never have made it out in time. You see, don't you?"

"I'm trying to Mrs. Fortini," Will spoke with the understanding of an old friend. "So the vision showed you he wouldn't make it and that you had to kill Emily? When did you shoot your son?"

"Afterwards... Emily died first. It had to be that way. I knew I wasn't the one to do it... it had to be Tomas."

The compassion was still strong in Will's voice when he asked, "Why Mrs. Fortini? Wouldn't it have been easier and quicker if you had killed her?"

There was an odd look to her eyes—they were unfocused. William asked her, "Are you ok?"

"I don't get a *why*," she replied to Will, completely ignoring William's question. In fact, she seemed not to have heard the plainly stated words. "When I ask, all I get is an answer, no reasons are ever given. Nonetheless, I do know why. He would've stopped me. Tomas would've stopped me, and there was no time for arguments. So I said: *Tomas, you have to kill her in order to save her soul.*"

"You mean you lied to him. Her soul isn't saved is it?" The words from Father Alba's mouth were seasoned with accusation, there was a long pause, and the priest frowned at being ignored.

"Mrs. Fortini?" Will asked in a soothing manner so as not to upset her. "Did you lie to him?"

"Yes, I lied to him. I couldn't save her soul then and I don't think I can save it now. I could only save myself, so I said: *Tomas you have to kill her in order to save her soul.* He couldn't do it at first, instead he cried and blubbered and I was getting angry and afraid so I said: *Use the gun Tomas, make it quick!* But he wouldn't. The priest was almost dead, his face was nearly black and his legs drummed up and down on the floor, but they were getting weaker and weaker." Her voice droned on without emotion and her eyes were unblinking.

It was only when she repeated words from that night twenty-one years before that she sounded alive. William realized that Adrina was in a trance. It was to his son that she was responding to and he looked keenly at the boy and saw that Will understood all of this too.

Adrina went on, "I said: *Please, we don't have time, use the gun now or we'll all die!* Tomas had a gun. It was a heavy gun and it was cold... it was ice cold... cold as death."

"Why did he have a gun Mrs. Fortini?" Will inquired.

"I don't know but it was cold and heavy. He took it from his coat and put it to her head and said: *Mom I can't! I can't do it. She's my baby and she's so beautiful, I can't do it.*" Her voice had become that of a man, filled with heartbreaking sadness, and William's skin broke out in goose bumps a second time at the sound of it. *You have to kill her Tomas! The priest is almost dead. And the demon will come for me next... kill her now quick, please! Kill her for me!* I pleaded with him to kill his beloved daughter, so that I wouldn't have to face the demon again. I will never see the light of heaven, I know this, and I deserve what the demon is going to do to

me. But there was no choice. The only one that could live through this was me." She stopped talking and the silence rolled around the kitchen as the men sat still in shock.

Finally, William nudged his son to get him to continue. "Mrs. Fortini," he said in that odd comforting voice that William had never heard before. "Did he shoot her then?"

"No he couldn't do it. He put the gun aside, slowly and I thought my death would happen then. The demon came to me... it hurt me... it didn't want to kill me fast, like the priest, it wanted to hurt me, it wanted my suffering above everything else. It wanted to feed off of me... it wanted to eat... to eat... to eat... to eat... to eat..."

The repetition was chilling and William felt his goose bumps return in force and he shuddered at the sound.

"Mrs. Fortini?" This time Will said it loudly, obviously bothered by the dreadful words. "The demon looked into you, we got that, but then what happened?"

"To eat... Yes to eat, to feed off of my pain. It was crushing my toes with a hammer, each one Bam! Bam! Just as the pain would start to recede, it would crush the next in line. I was screaming... I don't know if the screams are in my head or coming out my mouth. But I scream for its pleasure. Then, like a miracle, it's gone and at first I was so happy, so relieved, I look down and my shoes look unmarred and the pain was fading like a dream. But then Tomas starts screaming. It is like a girl's scream, high and piercing and that sound scares me worse than anything. Tomas is a man; he fought in Korea... nothing should make a man scream like that. *IIIIIEEEEEEEEEEE!*" Adrina suddenly screamed loudly and it echoed in the apartment.

It was the scream of her son Tomas, tearing up from her soul and William knew then, that whatever evil Adrina might have done, he would not be the one to judge her.

When the scream ended, she picked up where she had left off, "I looked to Tomas and I saw why the demon had released me. My son had his hands over Emily's mouth and he was suffocating her, killing her in the most painless way he could conceive. The demon knew that if the girl died, his gate would be closed, so it went after Tomas. The vision had made it clear I was not to kill her, so even as Tomas screamed and screamed, I put his hands back over Emily's mouth and held them there with the stabbing pain of his cries drilling through my ears."

"Mrs. Fortini, did the demon go back?"

"Yes. Emily died. Eventually, Tomas stopped screaming and looked down at his hands. The hands that had killed his own daughter. He wept long and I wept with him, miserable and disheartened."

"Because of Emily?"

"No. Because it was almost time to kill Tomas?"

This baffled William and he mouthed the word *why* to his son, who asked, "Why would you need to kill him when the demon was gone?"

"To save his soul. Right, Father?" She turned to the priest. However, her eyes were still huge, glassy, and unseeing in this world. Father Alba looked at the others wondering if he should answer and William gave a quick shake of his head.

Will watched them silently and then turned to Adrina and said, "Mrs. Fortini, you lied to your son about saving Emily's soul. Are you lying to us right now about trying to save Tomas' soul?"

"The demon had shattered him mentally; his head was sweeping back and forth as if he could deny what had just happened. Tears coursed down his face, they rolled off his jaw and were landing on Emily's pale face, so that it looked as if she were crying, too. *No... no... no*, Tomas repeated over and over again. His voice hoarse and raspy. Tomas said to me: *It's too much, Mother*, and I said: *What? What is too much?* He looked up from Emily and I saw his eyes were going in two different directions and he said: *This life, it's too much*. He picked up his gun... the cold one, and putting it to his head, pulled the trigger."

Father Alba looked at the others. "Skipper told me the man had been shot in the back of the head... execution style. It was..."

"Execution," Adrina interrupted speaking without emotion, "Execution. I am an executioner."

"Mrs. Fortini, did he kill himself or did you, uh have to do it?"

"I killed him. I am an executioner. The safety of the gun was on. Tomas looked at it and pressed a button and I pleaded with him, but he said: *I can't be alive. I saw... things. I killed my own daughter with my bare hands just to save my own skin... I can't be alive*. I said to him: *No you had to do it and what you saw, it wasn't real. Please believe me, it wasn't real. Don't do this.*"

Tears came down her face again. Speaking as Tomas she said: *"It is real I know it, everything I've done... everything I'm going to do, it's all too much! I have to die, please let me die.*

"I wanted him to live, so I snatched the gun from his hands. *Tomas, you just saw the demon, you know Hell is real. You know what will happen if you kill yourself. The demon is waiting for you.*

"This made him pause, but it was only for half a heartbeat: *Then you must kill me*. I lied then and said I couldn't, but I really could because I'm an executioner. I'm an executioner, right Father?"

She turned her glassy eyes again to the priest and he shrank back away from her. Her face was that of a lunatic and despite her tiny size and old age, she looked dangerous like rabid dog. "I had killed before... executed... they were Jews, just a family of Jews. They all died, very horribly but at that time, no one cared about the Jews. The Einsatzgruppen came for us Gypsies and we fled from them. The Jews had passports and we did not." Here she shrugged; a little jerk of her scrawny shoulders. "They would've died anyway... I was just their executioner. We were in Austria, just outside of..."

Everyone stared in silence at her admission of an earlier crime, but William felt a sense of urgency, he gave his son a sharp poke in the ribs. Will jumped, startled and William gave him a look.

"Mrs. Fortini, what happened to your son?" Will interrupted the story.

She was slow to stop, "The death squad was just on the..."

"Mrs. Fortini? Tell me what happened to your son." Will's calm voice spoke with more authority.

"*Kill me now mother!*" She was back to speaking as Tomas. "He begged me to kill him and I still held back selfishly, but then he smiled and said: *There are knives...*

I have so many knives. It was the way he said it, with so much comfort and peace at the idea of the knives. I realized that there would be no stopping him, so... in order to save him, I killed him. I told him not to worry about the knives that I would do it for him and I would make it quick. He smiled at me and the smile was filled with relief, thank you was all he said. And I said... I said..."

She ended unexpectedly and blinked rapidly a few times, her face became alive with meaning, "Excuse me," she whispered.

In the silence of the apartment, it carried to each of them clearly. Adrina got up slowly and William saw the whole of her body was shaking. She went to the bathroom and shutting the door, left the four men sitting in dead silence. Each seemed afraid to break the silence and they all took to staring at Will inquisitively.

2

Will looked guilty as if he were on trial, and mouthed the words, "It wasn't me. I didn't do it." William knew this to be the truth and smiled at his boy in understanding. Will found the courage to use his voice a second later, and whispered, "What the heck was that?"

"Auto-hypnosis, that is unless you have some magic power of your own," Brian said and he looked sad suddenly. "Talitha and I had an argument concerning this just a couple of weeks ago... she would've found this all to be endlessly fascinating." He stopped talking and sat staring at the beat up table. They all did and it was some minutes before Adrina came back out, looking more composed.

She peered into the pale and ashen face of William and asked, "Commander, did that answer your questions well enough? Will you be able to trust me?"

It had. He knew what he had just seen couldn't have been faked. "Yes it does and I...having seen that with my own eyes. I don't doubt you... or blame you."

"That's nice, but I blame myself enough for both of us."

"But what about the girl's body in the basement," Father Alba asked, like a kid demanding just one more story at bedtime. It was an improvement over the fear-induced self-righteousness he had displayed earlier, but it still grated on William.

"I did it, of course," Adrina snapped angrily. "I had to. That is the way... you will see."

"I'm sorry for... it's just..." Father Alba seemed at a loss for words. "But why take her down to the basement? Weren't you tired after the whole thing?"

"I thought there would be a furnace down there, maybe one of the old big ones. I had to burn the body."

William's stomach rolled over and seeing his son turn white, he decided to get the conversation back to Talitha, and what needed to be done to save her. "You said earlier that we'd have to confront the demon, how will that work? We can't touch it without... dying. Are there prayers that might do something or Holy Water?"

"This is where we'll need Father Alba the most. We will each be baptized and anointed with the Oil of Chrism, this will keep the demon away from us physically. It will not stop it from entering our minds, however. That is why we must be quick."

Confronting it will be easy; as I said, it will come for me first. I will last as long as I can, but one of you must step forward to challenge after me."

William would be next, in his mind this was a foregone conclusion. "First off, Mrs. Fortini, I don't like the idea of you coming, but Brian's logic does seem correct. You'll confront it first but only because of your vision. I'll go next. After that, boys, you'll have to decide who goes next, as the situation warrants."

"Don't plan too far ahead, Commander." Adrina was stern and her voice carried authority. "You will all know what to do when the time comes but you must be quick and decisive. Do not hesitate to do what you have to do! And I know you don't want to hear this, but it may come to it. If there is no other option, your Talitha, might have to be killed."

"No!" Brian snapped like an angry dog, "It won't come to that. I won't let it."

Adrina grimaced and hung her head. "If you can't be strong enough to do the very hardest things, you shouldn't come. You three... you each have to be willing to kill. It will not be enough that you are willing to lay down your lives. If this ends in all of our deaths the demon will go on and on."

"I thought the exorcism was going to be performed on Mrs. Harris. Do we need to bring Talitha at all?" William's brow knit in consternation.

"Yes, she'll need to be there. She won't be able to get back if the gate is destroyed and her body is not present. There's no guarantee, either way, and it will be up to her to make it back."

"She'll do it," Will intoned with great certainty. "She's fearless." William and Brian nodded in agreement.

"Good. That is good, her chances will be much better."

Father Alba suddenly spoke, looking resolute, "I'll go into the house...if it will help. I should do more. I'm a priest after all."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Father." Adrina suddenly exuded kindness and understanding to the man, and she even reached out and patted him on the hand. "Because you're a priest the demon will go for you first. It'll find any weakness and destroy you completely with it." He started to protest but Adrina carried on, "I understand, we all do, the need to fight this evil. But you were called by the Lord to minister to the needy, the poor in spirit, not to do battle with this monstrous creature."

"Yes, but it's also part of my vocation... I can't run from it and I can't pick and choose which aspects, I wish to perform."

"Father you will be needed! Everyone here will need to be baptized. You will need to hear all of our confessions and then there's Communion. We do need you." She was earnest and wasn't just trying to mollify the priest.

"And the exorcism of course." William felt it odd to have to remind Adrina of the priest's most important job. "If it'll work in the doorway of the kitchen then please do it there and don't feel bad in any way."

"It's just that I want to do more," he sighed. "I just can't believe we're talking about demons!"

"Nobody ever truly does Father, until..." She left off with a shrug.

"I suppose you're right. You know, I never really believed in Hell until today." He paused looking at them for understanding and found it in William who was in the same boat. "I always thought Hell was simply the absence of God."

This seemed to rile Adrina and her face held thunderclouds that looked to explode on someone. "It is. You're right; Hell is the absence of God. However, you say it in such a casual way, as if it is a land where your ice cream Sundae doesn't come with cherries or where there are dogs but no puppies! You of all people should know that God is in everything!" Her voice grew loud and shrill, "Everything that is, but sin! Hell is built on sin, the blackest sin and only the truly greatest sinners can abide it because they have become their sins and can't see themselves any other way."

The priest shifted uncomfortably but William was curious to her point of view. "What about the demon, did God make it?"

"Yes, of course. God is the originator of all. The demon was once a being of some sort, but turned away from the Creator as have all those who dwell in the void. Demons are those who reject God completely and rejoice in their evil. That is the great difference. All the other sinners in the void know their sins, they don't rejoice but are ashamed, and that is what keeps them from God. Their souls still acknowledge God and all his works, and this is why they are so coveted by the various demons."

The men all looked slightly confused at this and Adrina went on, "A being that casts itself into the void still has memories of its life...it still feels to a certain degree through those memories. Even though demons reject God, they still want what only He can provide: happiness, love, and laughter. Everything that makes life enjoyable. The demons collect souls in order to rip out those memories... to *feel*, if only for the most fleeting of moments, something other than their own terrible emptiness."

"Why?" William demanded. He had been picturing his baby girl in the clutches of the demon and his anger came to a boil. "Why does God allow this to go on? I don't get it. This is one of the reasons I don't... I didn't believe in God. He could stop all the pain and misery but he doesn't."

Adrina looked to the priest to answer William, but he had an expectant look about him and was waiting on her to continue. "He could, Commander. He could do all of that and more, but it would destroy his greatest gift to us."

"Life?" Brian asked.

"No, a cactus has life; I'm talking about free will. Freedom! Commander, you're free to love God with all your heart or to turn your back on him and build your own personal hell. It's that free will that makes you who you are."

"Yes, but I'm talking about all the misery in the world. Why does God let..."

"And I am too!" she responded. "Misery is a direct consequence of free will... a murderer must choose to murder, a rapist must choose to rape. They know their actions are wrong and they may hide their faces, but they still choose to do it. People choose to live along rivers that they know will eventually flood and destroy their homes and kill their children. They then foolishly blame God for their own choice! God could protect you from your own choices, he could coddle you and keep you from harm, but you would become bored and tire of your life quickly."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes necessarily! When your children were small, they had training wheels on their bikes, yes? Yet you took them off because it was limiting their fun. Life is like riding a bike—the faster you go, the more fun it is. However, there's also more

danger as well. God could take away the danger but, implicitly, the fun would go as well. Can you imagine a world without consequences? There would be no meaning in anything. You could jump off a building without getting hurt. But after awhile, you would be bored by it. You would be bored by everything! Do you still play Tic-Tac-Toe? No? Why? Because it's boring, there isn't anything to the game, there's no challenge, and it always ends in a draw. That is what the world would be like... dull and pointless."

"I can see that in our world, but what about hell? Why does God send people there?" Brian asked thoughtfully.

"You have it wrong. God doesn't judge and throw people into hell," Adrina explained patiently. "Even the greatest sinners are welcome into His presence. When you die, you won't have any of this," she gripped the Commander's bull-like shoulders. "You'll be stripped down to your purest essence, your thoughts, your experiences, your memories, your love, this is what you take with you to share. However, the light of the lord is revealing and everything is open to Him, and there are those whose transgressions are too great. Free will exists even after death and instead of facing their actions, these sinners hide in shame at their own atrocities and they flee from the light of the Lord. They dwell in the void, hating God and hating what they were and what they did, until they are found by a darkness greater than themselves."

"The demon? Why doesn't God destroy the thing?" Brian asked, his eyes smoldering with anger. "He could, but he doesn't! He should go and free all the souls it has collected."

"Maybe he does, Brian, but would that change anything? God will never force you to love him and he could destroy every demon in the void but as long as there are souls denying him, new demons would come into existence."

William considered this logical, but wondered if he would have been swayed by the arguments for the existence of God, if it hadn't been for the demon. It had been so impossibly evil that no amount of Darwinism or evolutionary theory would ever be able to explain it away. Moreover, there had been that moment when he had died, clutching his useless play sword, when he had felt what the demon had been craving. Below all of William's shallow emotions and insignificant thoughts, ran something elemental, something that was simultaneously a part of him as well as connected with something far, far greater. It was nearly impossible to wrap his mind around the concept, except to visualize it as the opposite of the demon. It was pure and true, and his heart rejoiced at the awareness of it. It was God. God had been in him.

His son disturbed his thinking with a painful question: "Mrs. Fortini, the demon is feeding off of Talitha, will she be normal when we get her back?"

"Honestly, I don't know. A lot will depend on her."

This was followed by a moment of silence in the old apartment and then Father Alba spoke in a forceful voice, having clearly come to some conclusion. "I feel the need to confront the demon... directly during the exorcism."

William nodded in agreement and was glad for the courage the priest was showing. His earlier emotional state had been annoying but at the same time understandable. The man was definitely not a heroic figure; he was more like the Ichabod Crane of the priesthood.

Adrina gave the priest an odd look. "Please wait until the moment of truth, before you make that decision. Now we must be going very soon. I feel it, the urgency to hurry. But the subject was changed and I need to know something. Commander you must tell me right now, are you willing to do anything... even imperil your immortal soul to save your daughter?"

"Yes," he answered gravely, looking her in the eye. It wasn't an easy answer after what he knew was now in him. Yet it was the only answer.

"*Anything*," she repeated the word ominously.

"Yes."

3

"Good! I will go the bathroom and then we go." Adrina pushed herself up from the table and William could see how her joints had stiffened in the short time they had been talking. Her knees and elbows snapped like dried twigs. At the sound she stopped for a moment and her lips came together to form a thin pink line on her wrinkled face. The sound seemed to remind her of something unpleasant, but she gave a little shake of her head and slowly made her way to the bathroom.

William slouched in his chair, and thought about what had been said. He was amazed when he found himself being shaken by the elbow. He had fallen asleep! The clock on the wall showed him it had just been for a few minutes. How strange. Adrina stood in a very heavy coat before him. She carried a large brown leather purse which was as wrinkled as its owner, and about her neck was a great black scarf that looked to have been made for someone much bigger. William's mind was playing catch up from his little nap and he looked about for his own coat.

"Oh, right," he mumbled, remembering it was June and that his coat was packed away with his winter clothes.

"It is draining to be so near the demon," Adrina commiserated. She looked around the worn down little apartment with a sadness aging her face, even more that the weight of her years. "Now we go."

His son wheeled William down the hall, while Mrs. Fortini explained that since time was short, they would have to confess their sins to the priest on the way back to the Island.

"I'm not sure what my sins are," Brian said and William thought the boy had never looked so nervous. "I know lying and stealing and thou shall not kill, but I don't really know what else there is."

They had reached the stairs and Adrina paused looking down at them as if they were a great obstacle. "You need to know that the actual commandment is Thou shall not commit murder. There is an important difference between killing and murdering." She started down the stairs with a wheezy little groan. "Your best bet during your confession, Brian is to keep the Ten Commandments in the front of your mind as a guide."

Will waited at the top of the stairs to give Adrina time to go down a bit and he spoke to her loudly, "Mrs. Fortini, I've only been to church a few times and Brian has never gone."

Brian, who was holding Adrina's arm and guiding her down the stairs, appearing like a larger than usual Boy Scout in search of a badge, nodded in agreement with Will's statement but Adrina had begun coughing that nasty wet cough of hers and missed it.

Father Alba, seeing the old lady struggling, went down the list of commandments slowly. William saw his son's brow furl at, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife."

"Father, isn't covet synonymous with desire?" he asked. "That's another thing I always wondered about. Why would God put in to me desires and then punish me..." he paused as Adrina gave a loud purposeful cough. "Oh, right he doesn't punish. Let's say I see a pretty woman and desire her, but I don't act on the desire, how's that a sin?"

"It's not. Covetousness is far more than just desiring." The priest explained and seemed to be his usual self, now that he was on familiar ground. "It's the precursor to many sins. If you see a pretty girl and all you say is wow, Va-Va-Voom, then that..." He stopped as Brian looked back in comical disbelief and shared a look with Will. "What? They don't say that anymore?"

Will turned a little pink in the cheeks. "No, not really but it's just... it sounds extra weird coming from a priest."

At this, perhaps to hide his embarrassment, Will started down the stairs and William leaned back in the wheel chair so that he was looking at the peeling paint of the stairwell ceiling. It made him the slightest bit nauseous and he tried to concentrate on the priest's words as they went down, to keep from getting sick.

"I suppose it does," Father Alba said and smiled for the first time that day. "But coveting is a state past just desiring. You see a pretty girl and you desire her, right there you're not sinning. Coveting is when you let that desire grow and it starts to dictate your actions. Do you then lie to your wife, so you can be with the other girl? Do you bear false witness concerning a friend so that she looks to you for help? It's that point when you start to lie to yourself— when the self-deception begins. That is coveting. Do you understand?"

William did... to a point. "But again these are just thoughts. If I covet without any other sin, where's the wrong in that? It seems Heaven would be an empty place, if thoughts counted as sin."

"Hold on," Adina wheezed, "You're missing the purpose to the Ten Commandments. Remember God doesn't care if you missed church a few times, or if you sassed your parents. That's completely beneath him. What he does care about is your happiness. He has given you life and free will, but also a small instruction book on how to be happy on earth and in the Afterlife. Follow the Ten Commandments, love thy neighbor, do unto others, love God and yours will be a joyful life."

"What about God being a jealous God, that doesn't sound as if everything is beneath him," William said, and almost immediately felt he had blasphemed.

Adrina stopped at the second floor and her breathing was harsh. She leaned over and coughed something grey into the corner of the stairwell. "The passage shows that the Lord knows of the false gods, such as Ba'al Zebul that I mentioned; the demon posing as a god. There's a very great danger in worshipping these false gods as the Gypsies found out. The term jealous should be interpreted as

protective, though possessive would not be unfair either. God wants you to worship him for your good, not his."

"What about not going to church on Sundays?" Will asked this between heavy exhalations, the strain of his father's weight was turning him red from the neck up.

"Keep holy the Sabbath, is what you mean... don't let go of him! You will crush me if you do!" The chair had slipped, with Will grunting loudly. She had to scurry out of his direct path. "You be more careful with your Father! Where was I... ah, the Sabbath. Once again, the Sabbath is for men, not for God. The Sabbath is to remind man of his place in the universe. We are so insignificant, yet there are those foolish enough to think they can replace God with science or machines, or their own great egos. When we go to church we learn humility—we learn our place. A humble man is not a sinner, he knows the greatness of God, and he knows his own failings."

Brian relieved Will for the final set of stairs and though William remained outwardly calm, he couldn't help picturing himself and the chair bouncing down the stairs like a pair of large dice in a Las Vegas casino. But despite his size, Brian was very strong, a pint sized Hercules, and he brought William the rest of the way down without mishap. At the bottom of the stairs, even though her cough continued, Adrina refused to take a break and she pressed on to the subway.

Almost as soon as they made the sidewalk in front of the apartment building, Brian asked to be relieved, "Will, can you push your dad? I want to go first with the confessing." It was clear Will had wanted to go first but he agreed and took over.

Adrina warned them all: "Make no excuses. Own your sins and do not try to hide anything. You must confront your past now or the demon will do it for you later." Brian looked slightly nauseous as he dropped back to talk to the priest. William could hear them muttering to each other the entire way back, and as they neared the subway, he wondered how many sins such a young boy could have. Brian finished his confession just before the train arrived and came over as they boarded, looking immensely relieved.

"I feel good, you know at peace. It wasn't that bad," he said cheerfully, but his voice changed to concern as he caught a sight of Will. "Are you ok? You look like you are ready to hurl."

It was true; his son looked very close to being sick, his throat kept working up and down, and William asked him, "Do you want to go next?"

"Yeah I think so... I don't know." He rubbed his stomach with a pained expression on his face. "This is so weird. It's not as if I've done a lot wrong, you know. I don't know why I feel so scared..." He stopped talking and stood with that sick expression on his face, turning greener by the second.

"It does seem rather invasive," William agreed with his son, trying to hit a tone of understanding.

"Invasive..." Will said oddly, and then gave a short nervous laugh. "Invasive is right. That's what Talitha would've called it. You know she made me..." he paused for a moment shaking his head. "I was going to say she made me look it up once, the word you know, but in truth she never made me do anything. It's just that I wanted her to think I was smarter than I really am. I always tried to be a better

person when she was around." He smiled a quirky, uneasy smile and went to the priest. His confession took the entire subway ride back to the tip of Manhattan, and he too seemed to have had a burden lifted off his shoulders, when he finished.

William was left very little time to confess to Father Alba, just the short ferry ride across the junction of the Hudson and East river. However, it was all he'd need. His sins were not many and they were fresh in his mind. When the demon had looked on him, it had rifled through his memories like an overeager reporter looking for juicy gossip, relishing each one of his sins. These he rattled off to the priest with ease, since he had long ago come to terms with his rather dull transgressions. It was the implanted memories that gave him the most trouble.

"Father, last night when I first confronted the demon, it planted thoughts and memories into me. I'm not making excuses... but it made me feel, uh, covetous in a sexual way, towards Talitha." This was terribly painful to say aloud but he wasn't going to hide from it. "I have never had sexual thoughts about my daughter before, and now suddenly I have this great guilt!"

Father Alba stared out over the waters, looking slightly perplexed. "I don't think you should ask forgiveness for actions that aren't your own. But please know, I'm not here to judge, I'm only a conduit, so if there was any part of the thoughts that were yours, you'll have to confess and repent."

"They weren't my thoughts."

"Then go in peace and sin no more." The priest had barely finished his sentence when the ferry rammed hard into the side of the slip. It was sloppy work on such a calm night, but William had seen worse, and the jarring sensation was familiar and comforting. They'd be docked on the Island in just over a minute and Adrina was tense, giving orders like the world's smallest drill sergeant.

"Brian and you... the big one, get over here! We're getting close to being too late... you boys; you get your father to the hospital as quick as you can. Get the maiden and we meet at the house. Father, go to the church, you'll need to baptize these three, get everything you'll need and don't forget the Eucharist! They'll need to take Communion you know." She shooed them on, as the gates opened. "Hurry... do not dawdle!"

Will took the first leg of their race to the hospital.

It wasn't far, just about three quarters of a mile and the two boys took turns and pumped their legs furiously. During the trip, William had little to do besides worry. He wished he could do something besides sit in the chair, but his exhaustion weighed on him like an anchor, and he wondered briefly where the demon would be in the house and hoped that it'd be in the kitchen, or maybe the dining room. With all the stairs he didn't think he could handle the attic, but it was a better alternative to the basement. Knowing that a girl had been roasted down there made his skin crawl, and he shivered briefly despite the warmth of the night. He decided to concentrate on something productive instead: how to kidnap your own daughter from a military hospital.

At that time of night the corridors of the building were empty and William saw that getting her out of the hospital would be easy, compared to getting her out of her room. Talitha lay hooked up to a machine that assisted her to breathe, which they would have to keep going somehow. Not only that, she had at least three electrical leads running from her body and removing any one of them would set off beeping alarms which would alert the nurse on duty.

The boys had moved so quickly that he hadn't thought of a single way to move her, before they were pulling into the vacant parking lot. He directed them to use the service elevator at the near end of the hospital since it was the least used. As it was, the place was so deserted that they could have used the main elevators. The building seemed asleep and a few minutes later, they slipped noiselessly into Talitha's room.

Save for the breathing of four sleeping girls, the room was silent. All but Talitha, came awake slowly and Gayle who may've been the bleariest asked, "Was it her? Was it the right lady?"

Her voice seemed loud to William and he whispered in an exaggerated fashion, "Yes, she's on the Island with Father Alba, He's going to do an exorcism, not on Talitha but on Henny Harris." He explained quickly the odd story and events surrounding Adrina.

"Wow!" Lisa exclaimed quietly. "She has psychic powers. This is great! We have a chance now."

William answered Lisa but did so while looking at Gayle determinedly, "There's no 'we', Lisa. Only the three of us, Will, Brian, and I are going. I wish Will didn't have to go, but the lady insisted. She believed it's important."

Gayle appeared in a state of shock at the idea of sending her son back into the house. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whispered, "My boy... not my boy."

William went to her and slipping from the wheel chair, knelt down in front of her. "Honey, he's not a boy anymore. He's a man, a valiant man and I need him by my side." He said this, not only to reassure Gayle but also to bolster Will, who periodically let his fear out to stampede across his face, and was currently looking slightly pale.

Gayle nodded through her tears and rubbed her eyes hard with the palms of her hand. "Ok... ok! But you listen to me." She suddenly tossed aside her fear and despair and looked at him fiercely. "You *ALL* come back! None of this Blue Book crap! You all come back. I don't care what you have to do, but you will all come back."

"We will. Whatever it takes. I promise." William would've assured her to a greater degree but his body felt limp, like a slowly deflating balloon, and he struggled to get back to his chair. He sagged into it and tried to concentrate on his wife's face to keep his head from spinning. *Please be in the kitchen*, he thought to himself. If the demon was in the attic... he refused to think on it anymore and was grateful when Brian came in to the room. Grateful but also puzzled. "Where were you?"

"Just doing a little recon. There's a single orderly at the station. If we can get him to move, we'll be able to get Talitha out. The main problem is that there are only two other patients and they're both on this end."

Will went to the door, peeked out, and then looked to his little sister. "Katie, do you think you can sneak past that big desk and go all the way to that last room on the right?"

She poked her head out and took her bearings. "Yes, that'll be easy," she said without a trace of fear. "But which way is right again?"

He pointed to the far wall. "That way. The last door on that wall." She started to go but he pulled her back in. "Not yet, Bunny. Here's the plan." Will picked up Gayle's dinner tray. "Katie, you go to that room and drop this tray as loud as you can. Then hide in the closet. Can you do that?" She nodded as if it were nothing. "Good. If you're caught just say you dropped the tray and you hid because you were scared. When the orderly goes to check out the noise we slip Talitha out of the bed, Lisa gets in it and we hook her up to the monitors. If any of those beeping alarms go off, we'll say we accidentally unplugged them." He paused for questions or concerns, but no one said a word, so he kept going, "Once Talitha is disconnected we put her in the wheelchair and slide her into the closet until the coast is clear."

William didn't like the idea of a teenage boy planning the operation and saw glaring holes in his plan. "Two problems: First, Tal and Lisa don't look anything alike and second, how do we keep her breathing while we do all of this?"

Lisa responded to the first question, "Look how covered up she is, you can barely see her. I don't think he'll notice."

"But the breathing..." Will said almost to himself. He went to Talitha, eyed the little pumping machine closely, and followed the tubing from it to her mouth. Tape held it in place both on her top lip and on her chin. He then went to the small cabinet next to the bed and after rummaging through it, he pulled out some identical tubing, tape, and scissors. "Here we go! The machine is simply pushing air in and pulling it out. I think if we cut the hose and leave the rest in her, we can breathe into it every few seconds. She'll be ok for a while."

"The extra tubing will go in Lisa's mouth I take it?" William asked.

"Yes, what do you think?" Will asked nervously, hoping for his father's approval.

"It's a sound plan. Her low body temperature will decrease her need for oxygen, so keep breathing for her, but make sure you don't overdo it. Will you almost burst my lungs when you saved me, which by the way, I never did thank you for."

Will went a light pink. "It was nothing."

"It was stupid to the point of being ridiculously dangerous... but also heroic beyond anything I've ever seen and I thank you." The pink color went into overdrive and Will's cheeks glowed red. "Now let's put your plan into action."

Brian and Lisa, neither of whom were affected by Talitha's touch, moved her with great care so as not to disrupt the leads right away. They put her in the spare wheelchair that Katie had played with earlier and then Lisa slipped into the bed. They taped the tube into her mouth and when all was ready, Katie glided silently out into the hall on sock-covered feet. She was quick and it was only seconds before they heard a clatter from down the hall. Gayle, who was keeping watch, put her unbroken arm down to signal that it was time to make the switch.

The monitor sang out, a low sorrowful boooooop when it was unplugged. In four seconds they had Talitha unhooked and Lisa was plugged in five seconds after that. This time the monitor sounded cheery and beeped loudly in happiness. The boys hid Talitha and everyone waited for what felt like a long time before the door

swung open. Now was when they would find out if their ruse was going to work, but it was only Katie.

"Where's everyone? Did it work?" she asked of her mother.

"I guess so. The orderly never seemed to notice. Let's hope a real emergency doesn't happen up here." Gayle's relief was contagious and everyone stood about smiling, except for Lisa who could only hoot happily through her tube.

William called them back to the grave task at hand, "We have to go."

This sobered them up quickly, and instead of standing around smiling, they stood around staring at each other uneasily and no one seemed to want to be the first to say goodbye. Gayle surprised William by being the first. She went to her son, her eyes shining with tears, hugged him and then kissed him. It broke the ice and they all said quick goodbyes and gave each other kisses, all except Brian, who stood with Talitha and breathed into her tube.

Gayle broke away from William, wiped her glistening face and said, "I'm going to distract the orderly... give me thirty seconds." One more quick kiss and she was gone. William felt a terrible pang in the deepest cellar of his heart, but kept his game face on and swallowed the fear. It was not a fear concerning physical injury, but rather it was the fear that he had looked into those brown eyes for the last time.

Katie cheered him up. In the thirty seconds they had to wait, she gave him an extra hug and said, "I'm tired of this hospital food, can we have pancakes when you get back?"

He couldn't say no to that and smiled despite his heavy heart. "Anything you want, Katie." With that, he goosed her bottom once, which sent her scampering away smiling. He then turned to his son: "Will, if you would be so kind?"

Will gave a quick peek out, and in moments they were buzzing down the hall. They would have looked like kids racing each other with the wheelchairs had it not been for the fixed looks of determination on their faces.

They had barely turned the corner of the first hall when William heard, "Hey! Shtop!" For a second his heart froze but he then realized it was Brian trying to talk around the tube stuck between his lips.

Turning back, they saw the reason he wanted to stop, Talitha was sliding out of the chair like ice cream down the side of a cone. Will went to him and they tugged her back into position. He then darted into the nearest room and came back with more of the white hospital tape. They wound it about her until she was semi-erect and looked as though she would stay put. It was terrible to see her head hanging to one side. It looked lifeless.

It made William almost sick to see her like that. "Could you lean the chair back? Her head it..." he couldn't finish the sentence. Brian pulled back and Talitha's head rolled grotesquely and slowly into a better position. Without a monitor telling them she was alive, she appeared a corpse in need of a grave.

Chapter 12

Will in the Void.

1

The front wheels of the chair kept catching on the uneven bricks and this forced Will to lean his father back in order to catch up to the speeding Brian. The street hadn't been smooth, but it felt like glass compared to the washboard of the sidewalk.

They had slipped out of the nearly deserted hospital without a single challenge and the darkness of the June night swallowed them up whole. It took all of a minute before Will felt the sweat rolling down his back. He was glad for it. He needed the work—the exertion—he needed anything to keep from having to think about what it was they were running so eagerly towards.

Every few minutes he forced himself to look ahead to see where Brian was. This was a reluctant move on his part because each time the house came into view, it looked larger and each time his chest tightened just a little bit more.

His father lounging in the wheelchair stretched and yawned widely in an almost bored fashion. Had it been any other man, Will would've thought the display of nonchalance to be an absurd act, but the Commander was fearless. He had literally been killed by the demon just fourteen hours earlier, yet here he was looking like he had just woken from a nap. Will wished he had that kind of bravery; instead he was practically wetting himself, and he regretted not having gone to the bathroom while at the hospital.

They were midway down the Row when Brian slowed and he was just nearing the Harris house when he came to a stop.

A low whisper from Brian: "Something moved on the Harris' porch."

Butterflies exploded to life in Will's stomach at the statement. His eyes grew huge in the night, and it was with huge eyes he scanned the darker gloom of the porch. He could see nothing but shadows, each of which seemed to hold the figure of Mrs. Harris grown huge and bloated with evil. Sweat trickled into his eye and when he lifted his hand to wipe it away, he saw that it shook badly. He slapped it back down onto the wheelchair's rubber grip and used his shoulder to clear the sweat instead.

"Go slowly past the porch, Brian," William commanded quietly. With his head cocked to the left and his breath barely under control Will followed slowly behind his friend. They were just passing the darkened porch when a voice spoke loud and confident.

"Kind of an odd night for a stroll, especially with your sick daughter. She doesn't look so good."

Will jumped, startled by the words, and the wheelchair ground to a halt on the bricks.

"Get going, Will," his father said in a very low whisper. Then louder, he spoke to the darkness, "Just taking care of a few things. Is that you, Henny?"

Will got the chair moving again and he followed the sidewalk around to the side of their house. This wasn't easy since it was a narrow path, which Will refused to look at it. Instead he watched as a silhouette drifted down the porch and came toward them across the bricks.

It was garbed completely in black, so that it melded with the shadows, and at one moment appeared large and at another small. It moved with the silent graceful ease of the demon and Will, who was close to panicking, kept his head craned around at a near impossible angle so as to keep an eye on it. Suddenly it strode from beneath the tree that grew between the two houses and the moon revealed Mrs. Harris.

"What sort of things need to be taken care of so close to midnight, William?" she asked with equal parts cockiness and curiosity.

"This has to do with helping Talitha, you probably wouldn't be interested." His father still sounded calm but he sat up straighter and Will could see he had a grip on the arms of the chair, ready to push himself up if needed.

The sidewalk strayed even farther to the left, which put Mrs. Harris directly at Will's back. He felt completely exposed to her. His skin began to crawl, and then to twitch along his spine. When she spoke again, from right behind him, he couldn't help it and his shoulders bunched as if he were expecting a blow.

"You're wrong. I care deeply for Talitha." The sidewalk jogged back to the right for the final short leg to his house and Will was able to see her again. Unbelievably, she was smiling and he stared at her in disbelief.

"Will!" his father spoke his name, a sharp word of warning and he looked forward just too late to avoid running the wheelchair into the back of Brian's legs. It must have hurt, but the boy only grunted and it was then that Will saw the reason for the abrupt stop.

Adrina was there. She stood stooped over, looking tiny next to the house. The moonlight cast shadows in her wrinkles, giving her face a craggy appearance. Father Alba then stepped from around the corner of the house and, for just a moment, Will felt relief as if the cavalry had arrived to save him from Mrs. Harris.

He moved around to the side of the wheelchair so Henny wasn't directly behind him and his relief evaporated when he saw her. Mrs. Harris looked completely composed and utterly without fear of the ridiculous group in front of her. He suddenly saw them as she must have: a shriveled old lady, a priest shaking and sweating through his vestments, a girl who looked more like she belonged in a morgue than a hospital, a man who was a sneeze away from another heart attack, a skinny little boy who looked to be just hitting puberty and Will, who was the worst of the lot.

He knew he was the weak link in a weak group and the need to pee was badly on him. And just then he remembered his foolish words from earlier; *I say we knock her out cold*. What a joke that seemed now.

"You brought a priest and is this his grandmother? Is this what you brought to *help* Talitha?" There was an edge of mocking cruelty to her voice.

Adrina turned her head without taking her eyes from Mrs. Harris and spat like a cowboy onto the bricks. "How'd you do it?" she asked. "You summon a beast of this much power not once but twice. Please, I'm dying to find out how."

Mrs. Harris' haughty demeanor didn't waver for a second. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. William, what sort of people are you getting yourself mixed up with?"

Will's father turned slightly in his chair to face her. "You can deny it all you wish, but we know it was you who summoned the demon. What kind of deal did

you make for the life of my daughter?" She pretended not to understand and only shook her head sadly at him. He continued, "Fine. Play it that way, but you should be happy because when we help Talitha, we'll also be helping you."

"You're so sweet, William, but I don't need your help. I'm doing just fine on my own."

The priest spoke, "Mrs. Harris, you don't have anything to fear. We're going to end the connection between you and the demon." He paused and her guilt was solidified in Will's eyes when she waited to hear how this was going to be done. The priest continued, "We're going to perform a simple exorcism on you. It won't..."

She laughed loudly in the warm muggy night. "Oh my! That's a good one! An exorcism on me! That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Let's say there is a demon. How on earth would an exorcism on me, help Talitha?"

Her laughter was unnerving in its complete lack of fear and everyone cast a questioning look at Adrina who only shook her head ruefully. "I guess there's no fooling you," the old woman said, as if she had been found to be a cheat. "I suppose I'll need this earlier than I thought."

She slid her thick scarf from off her shoulders and with a hypnotizing slowness, pulled from her purse a gun that looked gigantic in her small hands. Still slow and deliberate she wrapped the gun with the scarf and pointed it in Henny's direction. Henny had eyed the gun silently, everyone had eyed the gun silently, and when the scarf wrapped it, they eyed that as well.

2

The silence stretched out and Henny was just beginning to shake her head to say something, when Adrina spoke, "Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been one day since my last confession. I lied today. I told a group of people that the witch would be glad to have the connection with the demon ended. I said this even though I knew she would never do it unless she knew I would shoot her in the liver and drag her inside by her hair if she didn't go in voluntarily. I beg your forgiveness."

No one spoke.

Henny's eyes had been huge at the sight of the gun but at the words *shoot her in the liver*, they grew bigger still and her mouth came open and hung slack.

Adrina gave the priest a little nudge to remind him of his duty. He started as if coming awake from a dream. "Oh yes, oh yes." Without taking his eyes from the scarf, he mumbled, "May God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost."

"Amen," agreed Adrina, the gun never wavering from Henny's midsection. "Over to the garage, witch. Brian, please open the door."

Henny came suddenly alive. "Commander Jern, you can't be serious! Don't you see..."

"Shut it, witch!" Adrina spoke sharply, her face alight with inner fire. "With the scarf no one will hear the gun and I think we'll have just enough time to do the exorcism before you bleed to death."

Everyone, including Henny, fully believed that Adrina would pull the trigger. "Ok, ok, don't shoot, ok?" Henny walked crab like in a sideways motion to the garage and Adrina shooed her to the rear.

The old lady then began to bark orders: "Father, Baptisms first, then Communion, and please be quick about it, no sermons! Everyone get inside the garage. Will, there's a box just outside, its heavy. Don't go spilling it! Brian, please put Talitha on the hood of the car." They all scurried about doing as they were told and Father Alba mumbled prayers almost continuously.

William, who had nothing to do, sat near to Henny and glowered at her with intense hatred. "How could you?"

"I don't..."

"Stop lying or I'll have the old lady shoot you. I think she'll do it if I ask nicely."

Adrina who was helping the Priest prepare the sacramental wine heard this. "Only if you say please, Commander. Wait, who am I kidding? I'd shoot her even if you didn't say please."

"But..." Henny glanced around for some sympathy, but saw only hard looks. "Ok. You don't understand how it was. The demon haunted me day and night, until I was forced to... you know with that other girl..."

Adrina interrupted and her eyes were black as jet and oozed hate, "Emily! Her name was Emily!"

"Yes, I forgot. Emily was what it needed, you know a virgin. This was back when I was just a teenager. I was just a kid; it wasn't my fault." She looked up at Adrina and quickly looked away again. "The demon was always at me, threatening and promising. So..." she paused searching in desperation for the right words.

"You gave her to the demon, right?" William's words were ice.

"Yes," Henny replied weakly. "I had to. It was driving me insane."

"Stop it with that crap! You received something in the bargain, but it screwed you over didn't it?" The man's voice had become more hoarse and Will hoped his father wasn't exerting himself too much, too early.

"Yes... it tricked me! It lied to me."

Just then Father Alba cleared his throat loudly, and pronounced them ready to begin.

He started with a quick prayer and then breathed on each of them in an exaggerated fashion. He then made the sign of the cross on their foreheads and chests. Something salty was next placed in their mouths and for some reason the priest took off his stole and slid it across them. This Will thought was odd but when the priest spat on his fingers and touched Will's ears and nose with it, Will glanced around in confusion. He had thought Baptism was about running water over you or being dunked in a pool, not about spit.

"Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises?" he asked of them.

Adrina spoke loudly, "I do." The others followed suit, including Henny, which Will found ironic.

The priest moved to each and dabbed oil on their chest and between the backbone.

He then said: "Please repeat after me, I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who

was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen."

He spoke slowly enough for them to be able to repeat the words. They all mumbled along and when they were done, Father Alba switched to a white stole and took up what looked like a deep bowl of water.

Talitha was first and he poured the slightest amount of water on her forehead and made the sign of the cross over her. Will thought he would move on but instead he repeated the water and the sign of the cross twice more before saying, "Talitha, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Adrina stood next to him holding a small container and the priest dipped his finger in it and again made the sign of the cross, but this time it was near the top of her head.

This he repeated on all of them and part of Will was impatient at the elaborateness of the ceremony, but the greater part of him saw this as his only protection against the demon so he waited his turn patiently. He wondered if the protective nature of the sacrament was diluted by the fact that his baptism was occurring in a garage with a kidnapped witch in attendance.

Henny went last and acted for all the world like a real catholic, but it was an obvious front and no one was fooled.

After Henny was finished, Adrina again helped the priest, this time preparing the Eucharist for communion. Father Alba zipped through barley heard prayer while William struggled mightily to keep from passing out from the heat of the garage. His head kept nodding up and down as he caught himself falling asleep every few seconds.

"Can you move over Brian," Will said. The boy had never left Talitha's side and had been blowing gently into her tube the entire time. Brian slipped around the end of the car and Will wheeled his father to the door and opened it halfway.

The night suddenly felt wonderfully cool and refreshing. Will took a deep breath and heard the priest say, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper."

Suddenly his favorite part of the Mass came to mind and he said aloud, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." This earned him a nod from Father Alba, who was now ready to start communion.

"The witch first please, Father," Adrina said; Henny looked up nervously.

"The body of Christ," the priest intoned solemnly and held out the wafer of unleavened bread to her. Henny looked blankly at it.

"Say amen and then eat it, don't worry, it's not poisoned," Adrina added with a smile.

She did as she was told and then the priest took up one of the Dixie cups that held the wine. "The blood of Christ."

"Amen," she said with a little more enthusiasm and knocked it back as if it was a shot of whiskey. Father Alba gave her a tired look and then went to the rest in turn.

Will took his next and when William, who was last in line, was finished, he said from his wheel chair, "Ok, are we all done?" The priest nodded and William

continued, "Then it's time to get moving. Boys, you need to get your game faces on. If you have any fear you'll need to toss it aside now, because in there, it'll freeze you in place."

Will felt his butterflies kick into high gear but now there was a little something extra that he tried to ignore. Without realizing it, he began to rub his stomach and within moments, he knew he was going to be sick. He tried to fight it, but it was losing battle and a second later, he ran for the side of the house. There, he heaved up the tiny mushed wafer and the teaspoon or so of wine, he had drank. His body didn't think it was done and retched loudly for a few minutes, but nothing of substance came up and he finally sat back in the grass shaking.

"You ok, Will?" William asked from a discreet distance.

"Yeah, just give me a minute." His need to relieve himself came on him urgently and due to his shaking hands his zipper seemed very hard to work. After a short struggle, he got it down and urinated against the demon-infested house. When he was done he felt almost giddy with relief.

"Do I have to take Communion again," he asked Father Alba, who stood hunched over, leafing through a leather bound book.

"No, once is enough, even if you get sick. But..." he paused and licked his lips nervously. "Like your Father said... I guess now is the time to get going." He sounded terribly unenthusiased at the idea.

"We cannot go yet," Adrina stated, focusing her gaze on Henny. "I have to know how she's done this. The manner of the summons may be of great consequence."

Henny looked about her, surprised at the question. "I don't remember all of it but I wrote it down. This isn't a trick, I swear. It's in my house." She laughed a slightly crazed laugh. "It's in the freezer! Funny huh? I couldn't keep it near me, it just gave me the creeps. I drew symbols and... never mind... you can see for yourself. Send one of the boys to get it."

Adrina looked at her in a peculiar way. "You put the instructions for summoning a demon in your freezer?"

"Yeah, I really did, funny huh? It's in a bag of coffee...no one drinks it but me. Greg is such a... I mean all he drinks is tea, like one of those British ladies."

Will realized if anyone was going to get the summons, it would have to be him, and the idea of heading into the witch's lair, as his mind suddenly saw it, filled him with secret dread. "I... I can get the summons if you want it," he said trying his best to sound natural.

"No, I think we won't need it after all." Adrina looked down at Henny, contemplating. Seconds went by with the garage still and quiet. Will was terribly antsy to get started. He worried he'd lose his nerve and chicken out if they didn't get moving fast. Still, Adrina delayed. She squatted down next to Henny and looked into her eyes. "Tell me how this all started."

William also grew impatient and sighed loudly at the delay, but there seemed to be no hurrying Adrina. Henny didn't seem to mind, in fact she appeared very relaxed. "It was an accident. A friend of mine had a Ouija board and we were just pushing the little pointer around scaring each other. Then she went to the bathroom and I was just messing with it when I noticed my hands were spelling out words. The pointer would tug just the slightest bit under my fingers, it spelled out: *Who are you?* I wish I hadn't answered. But I did."

Henny stopped talking as if that was the end of the story and she blinked in surprise, or so it seemed to Will. Adrina said, "And it had you, didn't it? You kept going back for more."

Henny nodded. "Yeah. It was slow at first. Like it was just learning how to spell words. Then it got faster and faster... hey, can I have shum more of that wine?"

Father Alba looked offended at the question. "No, of course not, that is Sacramental wine."

Adrina waited on Henny to continue but she was slow in answering and Will felt his butterflies pick up their tornado like action in his stomach, this happened at every break in Henny's story.

He had time to take a glance at Brian who appeared interested in the story, and looked serene giving Talitha her sips of air. This confirmed what Will already knew: he—Will Jern was the most afraid of them all. Even the priest had relaxed during his rituals, and Will was suddenly jealous that the man wouldn't have to go into the house.

"Come on, finish what you're saying," Adrina ordered, and Will saw that the big gun was back in her hand. However, it jittered about slightly, etching an erratic course over Henny. If the old lady shot the thing, it would be only a guess as to where the bullet would end up.

Henny was having trouble beginning her story again and her eyes, black and beautiful, danced in tune with the barrel of the gun, following it wherever it went.

"Bell... I mean uh, well," she started to say but blinked largely, her eyes running to catch up to the barrel of the gun. "I didn't do it hall really. The uh demon... It..." She paused blinking more, "It wush telling me what tuh do you she... It would shay... ya know, go get thish from..." She blinked stupidly, as if she couldn't recall exactly what she had been saying. She forgot about the gun and looked around, her head twisting about jerkily. "It uh, toad... what tuh... Hey! You did shumpin..."

Adrina nodded and put the gun away. "Bless me, Father for I have sinned. It has been about twenty-five minutes since my last confession. I desecrated the sacramental wine and used it to drug the witch..."

"Wha? Huh?" Henny interrupted, her head lolled to the side, she had trouble keeping it upright on her shoulders.

William wheeled himself closer, his face hot with anger. "That was totally unneeded. You had the gun..."

Adrina held up her hand to silence him, and continued, "I also lied to everyone here. I told them that a simple exorcism was all that was needed to save their Talitha. I should have told them the truth, one of them will have to kill the witch. It's the only way to close the gate and the only chance the girl has of getting back. I beg forgiveness, Lord."

3

A silence settled on the garage. Will looked down at Henny; she had fallen asleep. Amazingly, she was more beautiful asleep than she ever had been while awake. He didn't think he would have the guts to kill her.

"I can't do it," the priest said with finality.

"Neither can I. Aren't we supposed to be the good guys here?" Will asked.

"No, I meant I can't absolve you of your sins, Mrs. Fortini. You have to be truly sorry."

"Oh I am!" she spoke sharply. "I'm sorry I got out of bed this morning, or even let you four into my home! I'm sorry to have any part of this... I didn't ask for any of this. God knows how much I'd rather be home in bed right now. So don't presume to tell me, what I'm not sorry about!"

Father Alba looked chagrined. "You're right... the Lord sees into your heart, Mrs. Fortini and only through his power and blessing can I absolve you of your sins... unless you have some more you forgot to mention?" She shook her head with great weariness, and he finished, "Then I absolve you."

"Amen. Breathe for the girl, Brian." He had been staring at them; opened-mouth and the tube had slipped out. Quickly he grabbed it up as Adrina continued, "I lied because I had to. Because, as Will stated you're the good guys. Now, I will tell you the truth of what we must do." She startled the priest by reaching up and removing the broad white stole he wore around his shoulders during the sacraments. "This has to be bound to both the witch and to your Talitha, wrapping it around their hands should be good enough. The witch is connected to the demon. The connection runs through her black heart. Brian you have the sword?"

Brian took out the sword, which had been tucked into his jeans at the hip and held it up still wrapped in the cloth. Adrina nodded. "Good, hold onto it. It will be enough to stab the witch through the heart, but..."

"Wait!" Will cried, angrily. "Is this what you were talking about? Is this the tough decision that makes me a man? Stab a sleeping woman through the heart?"

"Don't do it then." She turned to Brian. "Will you do it?" His head went down and he studied the floor. "Commander, what about you?"

William looked aghast at the idea. "I uh, I..." was all he could say.

"Good for me then. I'll kill the witch now and the gate will be closed. Your Talitha will have to find her own way back." She raised the gun at the sleeping girl.

"Wait please," Will begged. His emotions were everywhere. Was this what it came down to? Murderer?

"Kill her up there, or I do it here." Adrina's eyes were black gun barrels pointing right at him. "Innocent... guilty," she motioned indicating the two sleeping females. "Good... evil. Choose! At least one of these girls will die tonight. Choose—the life of this murderous witch or your Talitha."

"I'll kill her," William announced forcefully. "I promised that I'd do anything to bring my little girl back and I will."

His strength bolstered Brian who nodded seriously. "I'll do it if I have to." Now all eyes turned to Will and he never felt further from being a man than at that moment.

"I don't think I can let this happen," Father Alba broke in. "I mean, I'm not supposed to, right? I should call the police or something."

Adrina spoke to him calmly, "You won't be a part of any killing, Father. You'll need to wait outside the house and under no circumstance are you to go in."

"But the police... this is illegal."

William, the Commander spoke, "You can call the SPs, we won't stop you, but it won't change the fact people are going to die here tonight. You'll only make it worse on everyone."

Father Alba licked his lips as sweat ran down his collar, "People? I thought it would be just the witch... I mean Mrs. Harris."

"Yes, her for certain, but also," William turned to look at Adrina. "You're going to die tonight as well, am I right?"

"Yes. I have foreseen it," she intoned quietly and apart from a grimace and a small shudder that went down her back, she seemed calm. Her death was what she had seen when they had first walked into her apartment. It had been horrible to watch and as he relived the moment again, his butterflies went into over drive. It seemed like a horrendous death judging by the way she'd acted and Will wondered if his own would be just as bad.

Despite the fact he'd just gone a couple minutes prior, the need to pee came over him again. It was terribly urgent—Will clutched his legs and tried not to think about it. Instead, his mind went to the death of Father Menning, he pictured the black face, and the eyes a white goo mixed with blood running from the gaping sockets in his head. At this Will's bladder let go; it was only a few small drops and stupid relief swept over him just as before.

Father Alba looked at the tiny lady. "What should I do then? What can I do to help?"

"This is important... you must burn the bodies, the witch's and mine, and any others."

"No I meant in the house. What can I do in there?"

"Nothing. You'll die if you go into the house. The demon's not stupid and it'll focus on you first. You'll die before we get ten feet into the place. This fear you have, the demon can kill you with it—but first it will drive you insane."

The priest paled at the notion. Will suddenly felt lightheaded and had a great desire to breathe the cool night air. With his heart thumping madly in his chest, he turned toward the garage door.

"Oh jeez," he said quietly to himself.

If the priest could be killed so easily by his fear, Will wouldn't stand a chance. He'd be the first to die. Excuses why he couldn't go into the house blossomed up in him like blackened roses. They were childish and pathetic and he strove to think of better ones, but nothing came to him except the vision of Father Menning and his ruined face. Will wanted so badly to run away that his feet moved in the direction of the ferry before he even realized it. Brian said something to him but Will was now picturing the ferryboat, seeing himself on it; the warm night air running over him as the boat sped away and he barely heard.

"What did you say?" Will asked.

Brian gave a small breath and pulled the tube from his mouth, his hand shook obviously. "I asked, what did *you* say? You said something just now." Will felt confused and didn't think he had said anything.

"I said something?" he asked blankly, his eyes fixed on Brian's shaking hands.

Brian noticed what Will was staring at and said sheepishly, "Man, I'm scared to death."

Will's eyes bugged at the sentence and he spoke in a rush, "Me too! I thought I was the only one." The idea that Brian was afraid also, ironically seemed to give him a touch of courage. "It'll be ok. I think so at least," he said to encourage the smaller boy.

"I hope so," Brian said. "But the idea of dying... like that priest makes me want run home and hide in my mom's bed."

Will had a sobering thought. "Do you love Talitha that much... you know, to risk this?"

"I do," Brian replied simply. He stuck the tube in his mouth and gave her a little more life.

Adrina watched them and Will began to wonder about her as well. "Mrs. Fortini, why are you doing this? I don't see how your fate could get that much worse."

"Yes, I worry over the physical pain but... I have not been a good person. A lot of times yes, I have been good. But I have done some things, some very bad things and now I have to consider my soul. This will be my last chance to balance things out. Which reminds me... Father, I said you'd have to burn the bodies of the witch and mine, but not together! Her remains, the ash and bones, have to be dumped into a river or a very large stream. As for me, I want somewhere nice. One of those pretty little towns upstate that looks like it belongs on a postcard. I want to be around people... find me a hill where the trees will turn orange and gold in the fall, maybe one that overlooks a park or a school, so I can watch the children run and play. That sounds nice doesn't it?"

She seemed to be talking to Will so he answered, "Yes ma'am, but what about heaven?"

"I hope so. I hope that's where I'll go, but I better cover my bets." She looked to the priest. "You can do it. Just use lots of wood and gasoline and don't stand down wind. Oh! I almost forgot, if we all die, burn the house down, ok?"

"What?"

"Yes. If we're not back in twenty minutes, burn it down. The gate has to close or there'll be more deaths. In fact if we all die that will mean Mrs. Harris will be alive, and I guarantee she'll come after you, Father. And, she'll come after your wife, Commander and your other daughter as well. It's another reason to be strong and do the hard thing."

Father Alba looked sick with fear, but he nodded and mumbled something that sounded like an Ok.

"We shouldn't wait any longer," Will's father declared with his characteristic fearlessness. The words made Will tense up quickly. The small spark of courage he had felt earlier was draining fast and he began to rub his hands together as if they were cold.

"This is the plan," Adrina's slight accent became noticeably thicker. "First, I go in. After comes big, strong Will... you carry the witch. Then Brian you carry your Talitha and finally you, Commander. Make sure the boys don't dawdle, I don't want to be up there all alone."

"Will it be in the attic?" William asked from his wheelchair and for once Will saw his father slightly unnerved.

"Yes, up at the top. Now as I said, I will challenge it first... and when I die, then one of you must confront it. Keep it occupied while the others tie stole and kill the witch."

There was nothing more to say and William got them moving. "Father, please push me. Boys, pick up your charges." As the priest wheeled him to the door, he continued to issue instructions, "Don't be slow on those stairs, and don't look back. Remember, do not freeze in place. Keep moving or you may not be able to start again. Good luck everyone."

4

Will heaved Henny up on his shoulder like a rolled up carpet and followed Brian around to the back of the house. The boy's eyes were wide and fearful as he looked up at the tall brick home. "How are we shuposhe to she in there? It's sho dark," he said blurring his words around the breathing tube.

Will glanced up and saw the windows were so dark they could have been made of coal.

"There'll be enough light; enough to do what has to be done," Adrina said.

"What about va vemon?" Brian asked.

"It'll be upstairs. It will want us all the way into the house before..." Adrina took a huge breath, her hands shook as she reached out for the doorknob. "...before it comes after us. It won't want us to be able to run away." She pushed open the door and Will, who was just behind her, was physically assaulted by the cold. It was worse than it had been before. He felt the sweat of his fear freezing on him and he was glad for the warmth of Henny and hugged her to him, as if she were an animal pelt.

Adrina clutched herself despite her heavy coat and stepped into the kitchen. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," she proclaimed loudly. Will felt Brian give him a push from behind and he stepped inside. Immediately, the cold invaded his lungs, searing them, it slipped beneath his thin clothes. His skin contracted in goose bumps, his testicles retreated from the dreadful cold as far up as they could go; despite this Will barely gave the cold a second thought. He was too busy being afraid.

The kitchen was impossibly dark and Adrina was already little more than a moving shadow.

"He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." By the time she said the word *waters*, she was completely invisible to Will. Another nudge and Will realized he had frozen in fear already and he was just two feet into the blackness of the kitchen. He started shuffling forward, seconds later, he hit the kitchen table.

"Ooh!" he gave a soft cry of fear and pulled his hand back. The table seemed to be made of ice and for a second he thought the demon had slid from its hiding place and was standing right next to him and that he had touched it.

"What was that?" Brian whispered in a voice that was an octave away from panic.

"It was me... I hit something. The table I think," Will said. He heard the fear in Brian's voice, but instead of it giving him a boost, this time it only made him even more unnerved.

"He restoreth my soul," came Adrina's old panting voice. She was practically at the stairs and Will hurried forward so as not to leave her alone. As he came up he saw her then, a small figure dressed in the color of the night. Despite her age, she wasn't waiting on the men and was already five steps up. Will bent his back against his burden and headed up after her. "He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

What was she talking about? It seemed to be some sort of prayer, but she was way off. The path they were taking was certainly not one of righteousness. It was a wicked path that would either lead to his death or to his becoming a murderer. It was created in sin, and sin was where it would lead. He paused looking up to get his bearings and saw the silhouette of Adrina. She had stopped and he could hear her heavy breathing in the darkness.

It was then that the Horror of the Shade looked upon him.

The demon, in the unused bedroom in the attic, sent out a casual look that nearly had Will tumbling back down the stairs. His mind became a sudden wreck and he reeled against the wall. Putting his free hand out blindly, it struck the railing, but even so he would have fallen down the stairs had the demon not moved on. He panted like a dog, while his brain scrambled to right itself. The demon was only being curious, it could have attacked in a much more powerful way, but it was only browsing through his mind, checking on their intentions.

In the darkness below him, he heard, "Uhhhhh!" And he knew Brian had been looked upon. Will tried to turn in that direction in the narrow stair, but before he could, he heard Brian say, "Oh my God!" Brian had been released as quickly as Will had been. William was next and let out a long harsh gasp.

Brian shouted, "Oh my God! It looked into me! It knows why we're here."

"Hold it together!" William growled. His voice floated up out of the shadows, sounding like it came from a very old man and he followed his words with a dry hacking cough, so that Will imagined his dad as wizened and wrinkled as Adrina. "It doesn't know or it would have stopped us already. Now get moving," the Commander ordered.

"It's just toying with us. We gotta go back," Brian cried. The boy's fear was infectious and Will began to shake in terror. Henny Harris started to shake too and then she screamed out. She was face down over his right shoulder and the scream was abrupt and without any warning and he staggered again, nearly dropping her. This was partly because he was off balance and partly because the sound tearing from her throat was so unnatural.

"H-elp me, F-ath-er Al-ba!" Henny's voice started low but went through the scale as if she were tuning it. It was an inhuman horrible sound as if she weren't alive at all—as if she was just the demon's sock puppet. Will's skin flashed from the inside out as adrenaline hit his system and he twisted in fright to look at Henny. He was in a near panic, thinking he would see her with long curved fangs in her mouth and great sharp horns upon her head, but try as he might it was impossible to see her. "The-ay are ra-ping me!" She screeched in a voice that was a poor imitation of a human's.

Above him on the stairs Adrina yelled, "Don't let the priest come in the house!"

"It's a trick, Father," William called out in his old man voice. "It's the demon. Don't come in."

"No! The-ay arrre real-ee ra-ping me!" the demon cried out.

Will was so horrifically repulsed by the infested body on his shoulder that he swung Henny slowly back and then accelerated her hard forward so that she crashed, thumping head first into the wall of the stairwell.

Undaunted the demon screamed out of Henny's lips, "The-ay arrre kil-ling me!"

Revulsion so complete had Will smashing her head a second time, uncaring that it was a person's head he was crushing.

Now there was silence both in the kitchen and on the stairs. The body hung limp on Will's shoulder, yet he waited, afraid. After a few seconds it became apparent that the priest wasn't going to come in and Adrina whispered back to them, "Let's go!"

Will started up the stairs and that's when the body on his shoulders began to increase in weight. Henny seemed unchanged in appearance still she grew heavier and heavier. In seconds, his load doubled and he bent straining at it, pushing his legs painfully through the motions of climbing the stairs.

The extra weight slowed him, but Will was very strong and he did not stop. Gasping for breath, he continued. However, the demon wasn't done. Henny twitched a little and then suddenly straightened on his shoulder. Her back leveled out and her arms and legs shot up so she appeared to be trying to fly like a cartoon superman. This unbalanced Will and again he came close to dropping her and was forced to throw her weight against the wall to keep her supported on his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Adrina demanded. Will was surprised he could see her so well, that he was as close as he was to her.

"She's having a seizure, I think." Will squirmed beneath her to get a better grip on the ungainly body.

"Then throw her down and drag her the rest of the way," Adrina suggested. This seemed like a plan, but just then, Henny went limp and her weight returned to normal.

"I'm good, go on," Will whispered breathlessly. He turned to see that Brian, whose eyes were as big as saucers, was only a few steps behind him. His father, only just visible in the gloom, was still slowly making his way up the stairs. Will straightened to press on, only to feel Henny's weight increase rapidly again, and the same routine repeated itself. Even knowing it was coming, he almost went down in a heap, and he had a feeling that was exactly what the demon was looking for, so he toiled on. His muscles were burning and trembling even before he passed the second floor landing and the final flight up was pure hell on his back.

Just four steps from the top Adrina stood staring into the darkness of the attic hall and Will was forced to stop.

"Go," he said.

Adrina coughed her wet cough and refused to move. After a few seconds, Will's burden became desperately heavy, and he tried again, "Move! Go forward!" However, Adrina didn't budge and Will was forced to dump Henny roughly onto

the stairs. He went up the last few, "Go," he said, as quietly as he could directly into her ear, but Adrina stood unmoving save for a constant shivering.

"I can't... I can't do this. I thought I could but I can't," she whispered.

Will was at a complete loss. She was the one with the plan, the knowledge, and the visions. "But the vision, remember? This will be worse for all of us if you don't go in there," he said looking down the darkened hall.

Now he could feel the baleful presence of the demon in the room not thirty feet away. It was there, he knew it was there, like a great black spider patiently waiting for its next meal. Will's heart had been beating rapidly before, but now it beat in a painful disjointed fashion and he felt each beat distinctly. He was very nearly paralyzed with fear, just as Adrina was and he remembered his father's warning about not stopping and how it would be difficult to get moving again. Suddenly Will needed his father, badly. He turned to look down into the gloom.

William was much further down the stairs than he had expected. The Commander stood slightly bent over, leaning on the rail, holding his chest. Brian was much closer and after the long climb he looked ready to drop from exhaustion.

Will realized the demon had them right where he wanted them.

If they ran now, only he or Brian would have any chance at getting out and Will didn't think it was much of a chance at all. This meant there was only one direction left to them, forward, but the thought drained the will out of him.

There was supposed to be an adult in charge, there was supposed to be someone he could rely on, someone to protect him. He had honestly thought that either Adrina or his father would confront the demon and that he would only be in charge of tying the stole. He was not even sure he could do that much. His mind suddenly started visualizing knots... slipknots, square knots, granny knots... and he shook his head, wanting to scream at the stupidity of coming up there.

"Move her. I can't get by."

Will heard whispered from behind him.

Brian, with his arms sagging and his back bent under his load, stood very close to Henny's outstretched legs. Will, in the beginning state of panic, had been close to screaming and jumping past his friend to run away, but he had been given an order—*Move her*. An order was exactly what Will had been looking for. It kick-started his body and he dropped down, grabbed Henny's hand, and made to haul her up.

She was heavy again but this was a good thing.

On the trek up the stairs with Henny's body weighing him down, he had been so focused on his exertions that his fear had taken a back seat. When he bent down now, he strained to move her great weight, and she came up very slowly. The exertion worked for him and his mind discarded its panic with each thump of Henny's head on the stairs.

Finally, he was directly behind Adrina and he knew she would have to get out of the way for him to continue. There was only one place to go: down the hall.

Will put an arm around her shoulders. She jumped, but the terror-stricken look on her face never changed. Her eyes were huge and round, her skin deathly white, and her overly large dentures made her face appear almost exactly like that of a skeleton's. With one hand pulling the limp body of Henny, and the other around

Adrina's shoulders, he gently guided them forward to the deep black doorway at the end of the hall.

"Noooo, please" Adrina moaned softly. "I can't." She pushed back into him, but she was feather-light and he pushed her tenderly forward to her death.

As they neared the doorway, Will felt an arctic wind picking up from behind him and at first it blew gently but then it grew to a gale. It was a noiseless wind or so it seemed. Just as the other time he was close to the demon, his hearing became severely compromised. It was similar to being submerged underwater, and everything came to him muffled.

Still the words, "Not like this. No please, not like this," seemed to cut through to him like a knife.

5

They gained the doorway and Will didn't bother to look in. He knew what lay waiting for him inside. Instead, he gave Adrina a final push, one, that in his fear, was greater than he meant and it sent her reeling into the room and she disappeared from sight. Putting his back to the horror, he turned and used both hands to pull Henny forward. Her weight had grown so enormous that it took all the power of his young body just to slide the unconscious woman a few feet into the room. The second he entered a great terror-filled buzzing swamped his mind, it distorted all mental activity, and it became so overwhelming that he stopped and shook his head rapidly in a poor attempt to clear it.

The demon then reached out with its tremendous power and made to crush Will. The boy's mind was suddenly engulfed with insane unearthly Evil and even though he was far more prepared this time, his body still convulsed and he pitched forward over Henny. He lay in agony, uncontrollably twitching as the demon tortured him. For how long the waves of pain wracked him he never knew, but it did stop eventually. Brian staggered into the room after having borne Talitha's weight up the three stories of the house. The boy's chest heaved and he gasped mutedly, with eyes grown huge. He made to put his burden down in a gentle fashion but the demon looked away from Will at that moment and looked upon him instead.

Dimly, Will felt a weight fall over his legs. The retreating pain ravaging him was still too much and he didn't care what it was. Nor did he care about the demon, or his sister, or the witch whose head he had beaten against the wall.

All he cared about was the pain. Savagely he slapped at the skin of his arms, which only a second before had been burning like torches. The flames had been vibrant orange, the smoke a nasty smelling cruelty and the sound of his skin popping and sizzling had been unearthly.

Yet—just like that—the flames were gone and the pain was like a fleeing echo chasing itself to hide in some insane part of him. A semblance of thought came back, and with it came the knowledge he was going to die and die in the worst possible way. He would die after endless torture with his fingers charred down to nubs and his toes beaten with hammers. In a frenzy he fought to get up from

whatever was holding him down, and his only clear thought was to run away as fast as he could.

He thrashed around in a panic before he realized that he was struggling under the comatose body of his sister. This knowledge didn't change his urgent need to flee; running away was the only thing occupying his mind. He had to get out of the house.

But suddenly his father appeared in the doorway.

The strain of climbing the stairs showed clearly on the man's grey face. Even though he looked to be seconds from another heart attack he was a gallant figure—every inch Commander Jern—and it rallied Will to see such courage.

His spirits were crushed a moment later, however, when the demon released Brian from its power and struck the Commander. He fell back from the doorway and Will could only see the man's powerful legs writhing and kicking.

Defeat entered Will's mind.

The demon could crush each of them in turn, without effort. There was no way it would allow him to tie the stole about the two women, let alone stab Henny to death. Nor would it allow him to run away and he knew that he would be tortured next if he tried. He pried his eyes from his father's agony and swept the room in a glance. Adrina stood just feet from the fiend. She was hunched over and seemed terribly small compared to the great swirling black mass. Her back was to him, but he could see that, like a child, she held her hands in front of her face as if that could in some way protect her.

She was supposed to confront the demon!

He suddenly felt bitterly angry—the feeling cleared a small part of his brain of the all-encompassing fear. *How could she just stand there while we all suffer?* He raged. The anger was good. It festered and boiled away at his fear and in seconds Will was in a fury.

Near to him, Brian struggled to stand, his eyes were wild with pain. "Brian!" Will roared out the name as his father would have and the boy looked over at him. "Kill the witch, now!"

Then, hoping he would last long enough, Will stood up and strode with enraged purpose toward the demon. "Come on!" Will bellowed at it with all the strength left in him. Amazingly, the demon recognized the challenge and released William from its torturous glare.

Will knew nothing of demons and their hierarchy, or of the titanic battles of will that establish their pecking order. All he knew was that he needed to give Brian enough time to stab the witch.

He wasn't even close.

When the demon turned to him, it was like the room in the attic fell away and Will was alone in a vast black world and there was nothing to it but him and the Shade's horrible, fell presence.

Before he even had a chance to get his bearings the demon's great will, formed eons ago, crushed his mind down to the size of a pea. The beast then did what it always did to a conquered foe. First it devoured its opponent and then it commenced to shred the pathetic being. It had barely begun to enjoy itself in this sport when a fresh challenge stood forth.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." Will heard this through the demon's great mind, as if he were seeing and feeling what the beast sensed.

There had been nothing to him only a moment before. His soul was the demon's and his face, stretching in cosmic pain had been added to the thousands of others arranged in a grotesque monument to the beast. But now his entire being came rushing back into the living embodiment of his soul and he suddenly felt new to his body, as if he were trying it on for the first time.

It was an amazing sensation just to breathe and he felt the intriguing pain of the cold air sting his lungs. Looking around, he noticed that everything in the room was tremendously magnified and with fascination, he could see the individual hairs that made up Talitha's eyelashes. They were black and thick, round at the base, but tapering to a point at the end. However, in the next second, his mind shifted interpretation of the light striking his retina and everything came to back to focus. His hearing too felt modified, and he recognized the red shifting of the sound waves, caused by his proximity to the void. All sound was being pulled, elongated, and slowed and this was accounting for the muffled quality to words.

His mind, discovering the cause, simply translated the sound to its common form and then he heard quite clearly Adrina say, "I will fear no evil, for thou Lord art with me." Will looked at the tiny lady and saw her body trembling like a newborn in the snow.

She stood a few feet in front of him and slightly to his right. He could reach out and touch her if he wished and he could see just enough of her face to know that she was afraid but also enough to see that she was clear eyed and deliberate. Taking another step forward, the scrawny woman challenged the horrendous demon, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

"Kill her!" It was William. Commander Jern sagged in the doorway, looking close to death.

Brian shouted back and for a second Will wondered why they were shouting so loudly in the quiet room, but then he realized they were both hearing things differently than he did.

"No! The stole!" Brian had not killed Henny, as he should have but instead had dragged the two girls together and stood over them with the broken blade in his hands.

The sound of a pencil snapping drew Will's attention back to Adrina. In the short time he had looked away, she had lost the battle of wills and now she was shrieking with untold anguish. Another snap followed the first, and more followed that. Her right arm was being rolled up from her wrist. The bones of her forearm went first, snapping repeatedly in quick succession and then the larger Humerus popped instead of snapped. Pop! Pop! Pop! Her arm was being rolled up like a garden hose, and through it all, she screamed in fantastic soul rending misery.

This wasn't an illusion, or a mental aberration like the flames on his arms had been. This was real.

The left arm was next and it went so fast the noise was a long crunching sound, overlaying her screams. Her dentures flew from her mouth, exploding on contact with the hardwood floors and large fake teeth bounced in all directions.

"The stole!" Brian yelled again and Will realized it was just within reach; Adrina had it about her neck. He was half-laying, half-sitting and he stretched out his arm to take it from her, but suddenly she started to move, her body began twisting away from him. Her head however remained fixed, staring into the gaping maw of the demon's gate and, even as he watched, the skin of her neck began to appear stretched and braided. Still her body twisted and finally there was a gruesome "twuck" from beneath her skin.

It was the sound of one of her vertebrae breaking.

Nothing was more sickening to hear and even as Will felt his stomach lurch, more vertebrae broke, one after another. Somehow, she stood through it all, but now there were no more screams.

In the demon's vengeance, in its need to cause pain Will saw his chance. Leaping up, he snatched the stole from her shoulders and with a quick movement, he backhanded it toward Brian.

However, he got more than he realized when he took the stole from the dying Adrina, and the second the white cloth left his hand, he knew he'd made a mistake. The air swirling around the demon was not a random thing, and the demon knowing the significance of the stole, sucked it toward the void quickly.

But Will was also quick. His body reacted with the speed of his youth, and even as one end of the stole slipped into the endless black pit, he had a grip on the other. He pulled back mightily, but the void was greater still, and he slid inch by inch toward the swirling chaos. The stole was half swallowed before the corrosive effect of the void blackened the leading edge of it and Will tumbled backward when it tore.

Time became everything. Seconds became as important as decades and Will knew he was almost out of time and so as he fell away from the gate and the beast beyond it he swung his arm back in an exaggerated motion and the stole came down in Brian's outstretched hand. The boy tugged it away.

Will laid there for only the smallest fraction of a second before his father bellowed his own challenge and rushed at the fiend. Will couldn't watch what would happen to the Commander—that would take moments he didn't have, instead he twisted like a cat, scrambling to get to Brian before it was too late.

For his part, Brian was desperately winding the remains of the stole around the hands of the two women; his face was a visage of terror. He finished wrapping the cloth before Will could get to him and was just picking up the sword when they heard the sad sound of the Commander falling heavily to the floor.

Will *knew* Brian was going to be too late. The demon blasted him as he knelt with the sword poised above Henny's breast. Pain twisted his pleasant features into a nasty mask and the sword fell from his hands.

And Will *knew* he would be next.

He saw the pain coming. It would be greater by far than anything he had yet suffered and he knew as well that he wouldn't have time to plunge the blade into the witch's breast. Instead, he grabbed the gilded hilt as it fell and pressed it to his body. A fraction of a second later the demon's mind entered his own, unleashing a furious attack. Will's body convulsed as he *knew* it would and he fell forward onto Henny, the blade driving deep into her.

6

Will became a part of the connection.

He was a part of Talitha, and of Henny, and the Demon, but most of all he knew the eternal void.

His soul and everything that made him Will crossed through the black spinning smoke of the gate and into the void. He found himself on the path to the world, surrounded by absolute darkness. The utter blackness held a crushing fear. He could perceive the fear, not just as a mental state but with his other senses as well and he knew that the fear was almost a living thing in its own right. He could feel it demanding and lusting after him, wanting to corrupt him and yet the fear didn't affect him but seemed to slide off him in an oily manner.

Wondering if this was how his father must feel, he ignored the fear and looked about, discovering that despite the dark he could see after a fashion. His vision was taken up with an insanity that was almost too immense for his mind to cope with. It was as if the walls of hell had been peeled back and all its misery lay about him.

He had to turn his eyes away.

When he did he discovered a dazzling brilliance below him. The Commander's blade—that charred piece of steel—had become a part of the void and part of the connection as well.

Except for the one moment when his father had attacked the demon with it, the sword had always seemed weak and pathetic to Will, but to the souls of the void it was nothing short of miraculous. It was a great shining beacon and all of the tortured raced to it. But the way was narrow and a great tumultuous battle broke out all around Will. It was a desperate fight that filled the darkness and it was between the shadows that the individuals fought and as soon as one was victorious, another cast him down.

However, the winner of this immense nearly infinite battle was foreordained.

The demon that had so plagued the Jerns had never left its terrible realm. It had only been able to drink through the gate, to see the world beyond, and to put forth only the smallest part of its power through it. Now, however it was going to occupy a body—Talitha's still living body—something it had waited eons for, ever since its own had ceased to live. It raced almost gleefully up the broken sword, happily destroying any of the appalling creatures that came before it. Its power in its own realm could not be denied and was absolute.

Will stood along its path, and despite whatever heroics he had performed, he was still just a boy while the demon had become a giant, a horror of shadows that dwarfed him. However, the crown of Will's head was still anointed with the chrism of his Baptism and his soul, recently purified in the baptismal waters was clean and virtuous, and Will denied the demon the body of his sister.

His mouth opened and he meant to say: *No!* However, something else came out instead. It was the *Word*, or the tiniest fraction of it.

"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God..."

That was the first line from the Gospel of John and when Will had read it in church holding Lisa's hand, he hadn't understood. But now his entire being was

suffused with it and he felt God's love—the animating force that gave him life—it was in him and around him, it was a gift, but not an infinite one. It was something that shouldn't be squandered or given up lightly and Will had to choose between hoarding it and fleeing from the demon, or using the essence of his life to fight the demon and save his sister.

He hesitated not at all, and the *Word* rolled out of his mouth with the light of many stars and shone brightly, exposing the deception and piercing the shadows. Its intensity seemed to bring with it a wind that laid back the enveloping darkness of the demon, revealing its wretched soul, a gnarled and wizened thing. The demon fled from the light and the intense reality of God's love. It fled into the darkness and hid in its own nothingness.

With the light of the *Word* all about him, Will saw that the lesser creatures of the void were still battling in a tremendous swirling melee. Talitha stood out among them, shedding a dim light of her own. She was struggling with a great hellish brute and the combat was fierce and her light became faint.

Will tried to go to her, but he was drained and he could feel himself on the verge of dissipating, becoming nothing. He had nearly given too much of the force that binds us together in life. However his sister was still in a desperate situation and he called out to her, but there was nothing of the *Word* left in his voice.

His voice carried no light or even sound, but his breath was still hot with life and it billowed out from him. The heat of it stoked the embers of her soul, her spirit was infused by it, and her strength grew in proportion so that she was able to throw down the creature that challenged her.

But Will saw that his Talitha had changed. She had become hard and menacing, and when her opponent lay prostrate before her, she tread cruelly upon its neck and gloated over it in triumph. It was then that a sound reached into the void from the world beyond:

"Talitha."

It was their father's voice, warm and strong with life. It echoed down the length of the sword and she looked up. With the last light of the *Word*, she saw herself as Will saw her. She knew shame at this, and she knew shame at things that were never witnessed outside the void.

Things done to her and worse... things she had done. She almost fled, even as the demon had, but fear and desire held her in uncertainty, until Will reached out his hand. And where once she stood far from edge of the sword, now she could stretch her arm out to it easily. And she did this, and took his warm hand in her cold dead one.

She smiled, and her love, a vague, distant memory that she had somehow held onto, crept shyly from within her. It came to him through her touch, and reminded him of life and he was eager to get back to it. And so pulling gently on her hand, he drew her forth from the void.

