

The background of the image is a dark, moody forest scene. Tall, thin trees frame a path that leads to a small, rustic cabin in the distance. The cabin has a thatched roof and a small porch. The overall lighting is dim, with a reddish-orange glow emanating from the cabin and the text, creating a sense of mystery and danger.

SHANTY RED

S.A. CHECK

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First Printing

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DEDICATION

When I decided to write this story, I found myself going back to a lot of fond childhood memories growing up in a Southwestern, PA “patch” town. The tight-knit community, the constant adventures, the shared sense of being. If you grew up in a “patch” town, you know what I’m talking about. It provided me with a real sense of identity and an almost idyllic fondness for having been raised there amongst friends and, most importantly, a strong family. Like everything, time changes places, just like it does to people, and I’m sure life in the “patch” has changed for those still there, but for me, it will always hold a special place in my heart. This story, in part, was my way of returning to those treasured memories, if only for a moment, minus the serial killing monster, of course.

Thanks to my family – my mom, my sister, my grandma, for allowing me that childhood!

Thanks to my wife and my daughter for supporting me in all my writing!

Thanks to everyone who takes the time to read one of my stories, whether it’s in a comic or a short story or novel! I appreciated each and every one of you and I’m continually humbled that you allow me to keep this crazy train rolling.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When American Mythology participated in Comictopia on BackerKit last year in 2024, it was a great event and reminded us of the power of sharing resources with other creators and companies. The event was a success and, shortly after that, we learned they would be following up that event with Booktopia, and we had an invitation to participate. Jim Kuhoric, the main man for American Mythology, asked if I would want to contribute to Booktopia and if I had any novels laying around waiting to be published. Like any writer worth their salt, I immediately shot back that I had several outlines just waiting for development, with Shanty Red at the top of the list.

I always thought Shanty Red would make a fun comic book, and looked to develop it that way for a couple years, but after completing the book, I think this really was the best way to introduce fans to that world. American Mythology have been an awesome creative partner for well over a decade, allowing me to work on a true wish list of top tier licensed projects, such as Stargate Atlantis, The Three Stooges, Pink Panther, Fright Night, Night of the Living Dead, Return of the Living Dead, Silent Night / Deadly Night, My Bloody Valentine, and so, so, many more, not to mention the original projects like The Grunch, Cartoon Puppet Horror Theater, Legend Fell, and New Year's Prey, to name a few.

For a writer to have a creative outlet like this is rare, and I wanted to take just a moment to thank Jim and American Mythology for helping to make Shanty Red happen, and for allowing me to entertains folks for the last ten plus years. It's been a ton of fun! Here's hoping for ten more!

DOWN CAME THE RAIN

Dying. It's a real bitch.

Clara's mamma liked to keep things simple. She told her daughter life ain't nothing but an extended death sentence. Better to numb up now than get disappointed by it later. She never really understood what her mother meant by all that back when she was just a young girl growing up in the holler, but she'd come to find a new appreciation for those words over the years, especially the last few weeks.

Even God even seemed angry at her that night. Rain pelted the aluminum siding of her ragged little mobile home, supported with cement blocks, rusted car jacks, and broken dreams. Life in the mountains never promised to be easy. Clara already knew that. She'd grown up in those same back woods, felt the same hard times as her neighbors and kin around her. But they survived. That was what mountain folk did. That was what she hoped to do that night.

The wind pushed with unyielding purpose against the glass in her trailer's windows, fighting to get inside with her. A sudden thunderstrike overhead caused Clara's heart to skip a beat, which was already pounding almost as fast and hard as the knocking against her bedroom door.

"What did I tell you about repeating myself?"

The man's voice boomed through the particle board separating her from his wrath. Even the wood had grown tired over the last several weeks from the barrage of fists and insults thrown at it. Clara hoped the alcohol would catch up to him and sooth whatever demon was festering inside. Sometimes, the

booze eased his anger, and she could fall asleep on the floor near the window, one hand on the sill in case she needed a quick escape. The lengthened silence from the other side of the door showed promise outside of the occasional snort or hack. Maybe sleep for her wasn't far off after all.

"This is my house, bitch!" Ricky slammed his fist against the center of the door. Clara watched the hinges shake and the screws holding them loosen with every shot he took.

Sleep wasn't coming anytime soon.

Clara moved over to the dresser and finished packing some belongings into a disposable plastic shopping bag, tying off the top to keep her meager possessions from getting wet outside. It would be almost a half hour walk to the neighbors. She'd done it before, but never in the dark and especially not during a thunderstorm. It wasn't an easy trip, but she knew she would be safe there, at least until morning, and then she could come back with the Sheriff. Getting the law involved would only make things worse, but there weren't many options left to her.

She moved to the window near the dresser and reached towards the handle, pausing long enough to glimpse her reflection in the glass. She didn't recognize the person looking back, the frazzled hair, the lines in the face, the loneliness in the eyes. This was not the life she dreamed of. She knew it would never be one of fancy cars and red-carpet paparazzi, but there had to be more to it than this. She pulled at the bottom of the window. The trailer had twisted over the years and warped the frame underneath. She pulled at the window with all the strength she could muster, barely raising it a couple inches. Lightning flashed outside and the thunder was quick to respond. It shook the tiny home to its core. Clara stumbled back towards the bed, knowing the center of the oncoming storm was closing in on her.

The door to the bedroom exploded open. She dropped her bag to the floor, glancing at the raging winds outside. She knew the image in the doorway even before she turned her head. It was the same one she'd seen far too often over the last month. Ricky stood there in the door frame, a bottle of moonshine dangling from one hand, a self-rolled cigarette in the other. His dirty, smeared, three-day without a wash undershirt barely covering his bulging stomach, which hung limply over his cut-off sweat pants. His breathes were heavy and deep, wheezing from the effort it took to break through the door. Sweat dripped from the end of his nose.

They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity to Clara, sizing the other up in their eyes. She could feel the rage he had for her seething from

his stare, pouring across the small room, covering her in his hate. He was like a backwoods demi-god, looking down at his lone disciple, angry for their lack of devotion. His grip tightened around the neck of the liquor bottle he held.

Clara had tried talking to him. She had cried for him. She had cussed at him. She had fought back against him, burying her fingernails so deep into his arms and back, she drew blood and left scars. None of it changed him, changed the new man he had become. The one filled with nothing but anger and hate towards the world, and unfortunately that comprised mostly of her.

“I love you,” she whispered, searching his eyes for any signs of the man she fell in love with years ago.

Thunder cracked again outside as the wind roared, ripping a piece of siding free from the trailer. Clara looked out the window as it blew past. The rain intensified, pounding down on the roof above, demanding entry. She turned back towards Ricky. He was already halfway across the floor, reaching for her.

“Liar!”

His hand buried into her hair, grabbing it, pulling her to the floor. She didn’t have the strength to stop him. Not anymore. She threw her hands out in front of her to catch herself as she smacked the floor, her palms slapping down on the bare wooden planks. He didn’t give her time to orient herself before dragging her across the carpet towards the living room.

“Ricky! Stop! Please!”

Those were the only words she could form as the pain in her head sent shockwaves of panic across her body. She kicked and flailed as she was dragged on her back into the next room as the ragged carpet bit into her skin. This was not the life she was promised. This was not her story.

Ricky flung her onto the tattered couch. She could feel the worn springs stabbing into her back as she hit. She spotted the open door behind Ricky and the storm still raging outside. The woods were dark and the branches seemed almost alive, thrashing and swaying in the wind.

She ran for the door, pushing Ricky out of her way. He stumbled over his own drunken feet and fell backwards. This was her one shot at getting out. She knew she wouldn’t get another. Making it to the door, she grabbed the frame and looked out into the night. The howl of the wind roared like a predator above her and pushed against her, trying to keep her inside. She could feel the sting of the rain on her face. The stairs leading to her salvation were only inches

away. Clara heard a scream from somewhere in the woods, and she looked deep into the darkened branches. A cold shudder rose up her spine as her stare met with a set of glowing red eyes gazing back at her. She paused, held captive by its stare, before slowly turning back inside and looking down the hallway to the bedrooms.

The sigh she let out was pronounced and a signal of her final defeat, as the small amount of fight she had left in her body exited with the air she exhaled.

Ricky's retribution was swift and fierce. Grabbing her by the neck, he forced Clara away from the doorway and slammed her onto the small kitchen table. She felt the sting of the table thumping into her side as he pinned her face against the wood.

"You think you can lay a hand on me?" He screamed.

The first punch broke her nose. She could feel the cartilage snap in her face and she had trouble breathing. The taste of blood flooded her mouth as it trickled down her throat. The only thing she could see was a half-eaten loaf of bread on the table in front of her. The slices were covered in green mold and gnats swarmed around them, still flying into the air after being disturbed.

"Remember who did this!"

The second shot was to her neck. She figured he was still too drunk to hit the same place twice, but she immediately lost feeling in both arms. Useless to her now, like her own pathetic life.

"You brought this on yourself! You did!"

She hoped the next blow would do it, would be enough to end this miserable existence, or at least knock her unconscious and give her a few moments of not being afraid and living in fear of a man she once loved. She could only hope he could pull out of his drunken stupor long enough to give her a well-aimed shot.

She waited there, sprawled out on the kitchen table, bleeding, exhausted, and ready for it to end.

"Momma?"

There are few things in this world quite like the strength a mother can find when their child calls for help.

Grabbing the edge of the table, Clara pivoted onto her back, lying flat against

the hard wood table. Every nerve in her body screamed out in pain, but the only focus she had was the little girl standing in the hallway. She wore an oversized yellow t-shirt, stained and ripped from age. Her large oval eyes were filled with pending tears, just waiting to unleash down her reddened cheeks. Her expression was a pitiful mix of fear and confusion. Clara reached out for her child.

“B-b-baby...” she said.

Clara followed the terrified stare of her child, back to the visage of Ricky, still hovering over her. Both fists were covered in blood and dripping down his knuckles to the floor. He held his hand in front of his face, looking at the mess he had made. His mouth was wide open, and his eyes softened as he stared back and forth between his bloody knuckles and the small child staring at him from the hall. It seemed like that moment froze in time, no one speaking or moving.

“I...I...I...” he finally stammered. “It’s not my fault.”

Ricky looked back down at Clara. She saw the anger flood back into his stare. She knew if that didn’t bring him back, nothing would. There was no turning back now. It was over for her.

“Betsy Ann! Run, baby! Run!”

Clara felt her front teeth knocked out of place when the next blow landed. The room spun around her as she looked up into the warped mix of hatred and disgust on Ricky’s face as he raised his arm for another shot. From the corner of her eye, she saw Betsy Ann running to the open door of the trailer and out into the night. A weak smile crept over Clara’s face.

“You made me do this! You bitch!” Ricky screamed, frothing at the mouth as he landed punch after punch. The blood from his fists splashing across the room. He looked up into the air and screamed like an animal caught in a trap.

Clara’s world faded to black as her head tilted to the side and she whispered what she thought would be the last piece of advice she’d ever give her own daughter.

“Keep running, baby.”

AUNTIE MEME, AUNTIE MEME!

The rain blew against Betsy Anne's tiny face. She didn't come out much at night. She didn't like the dark. And why would she when she had everything she needed in her room, like her dolls, and her TV and her movies. She didn't like it when her mom and dad fought either. It scared her, especially lately. Daddy seemed mad, more madder than she'd ever seen him before in her whole entire life. He was always angry anymore, like even the air itself just seemed to be bothering him.

Betsy Anne felt the wet ground and mud cover her toes as she ran away from the trailer. The wind blew so hard she had to strain her legs just to move forward, inching her way across the grass until she made it to one of the old cars in the front yard. Daddy told her not to play around inside them, but it was the only place she could find to get out of the storm. She pulled the door open and snuck inside, hiding in the back seat of the old sedan.

Her momma told her how to make it to the neighbor's house before. She'd even walked her there a bunch of different times, just to make sure she knew. But that was a couple hills over, and even in the day time, Betsy Anne wasn't always for sure. She never figured her momma wouldn't be with her when she went. If there was trouble between momma and daddy, her momma always told her to make a beeline there. She just smiled back at her, but truth was, she was never real sure what a beeline was. The ones she watched in the yard seemed to like to zig and zag all over the place. Plus, it was dark, and she had no shoes, no coat, and no umbrella.

Betsy Anne figured the best place for her was right where she was. She'd sleep there until morning and then things would be better between momma and

daddy and then she'd go back inside. Maybe momma would make her pancakes in the microwave like she'd do sometimes. Those were Betsy Anne's favorite! Hot butter smeared over each one and then like a mountain of syrup poured on top. She'd sit on the floor in her room and eat and watch her cartoons on the old DVD player her daddy bought her at the swap meet. Those were good days. There hadn't been one of those in a while.

"Betsy Anne! Where are you, girl?" The voice rang out from somewhere near the house.

Betsy Anne curled up a little tighter in her hiding spot, bringing her knees closer to her chin. The old car smelled rotten, like something had been wet for too long inside it, but at least she was mostly dry and out of the storm.

"Betsy Anne, girl! Daddy went and messed up! I'm sorry!"

She listened to her father calling for her. She knew he was sad and hurting. She could hear it in his voice as it cracked, but she also knew it was best to stay away when he got like this, at least for a bit.

"Betsy Anne! You get in here right now! I'm warning you!"

She rose up from the floorboards and chanced a peek over the seat. Through the cracked windshield, she saw her daddy standing in the trailer doorway, rain still pouring down all around him. She could also see her momma sleeping on the table behind him. He had his hands on either side of the door frame to help hold him up as he yelled out into the yard.

"Don't make me get the belt, girl!"

She watched as he stumbled down the steps and turned on a big flashlight. He searched around the front of the trailer, looking under it, and in the bushes. He spun around and the light flashed across the front yard, shining over the hood of the car she was hiding in. She dropped back down into the seat. Her breathing sped up and she felt her stomach tighten.

"Quit messing around now! Momma's alright! We was just playing is all!"

She was too close to the house. There was no way he wouldn't find her there. She had to move. Betsy Anne slid across the backseat of the car to the passenger side. The beam from her daddy's light flashed through the windows and across the hood of the car again. She froze. Daddy had never hit her before, but he sure seemed to like hitting mamma lately. Mamma would tell her it was because he cared so much, and they were going through a hard time, and there

wasn't any work, but Betsy Anne could always tell when her mamma was lying. Momma just didn't want her to hate him for what he did.

She reached for the door latch, pulling it back as quietly as she could, until the lock on top finally popped up. She pushed the door open just a bit and slid off the seat, crawling back outside into the cold mud and rain. She laid on her belly on the ground and watched as her daddy's boots appeared on the other side of the car. She saw the light shining in the woods behind her as he stopped.

"Betsy Anne?"

From her side of the car, she watched as her daddy dropped to his knees on the ground, the mud and rain splashing as he hit. His arms dropped down to either side of him, and she saw the large knife in his hand. He began to sob.

"Oh, my God!" he cried. "What have I done? I didn't want this to happen! Betsy Anne-girl, I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry."

She listened to him, kneeling in the mud, weeping like a child, like when her dog, DeeDee, got killed by that coyote when she was three. She thought she'd never be happy again. She almost felt sorry for him, crying like that, and she reached out for him from under the car.

"Daddy," she whispered.

"Betsy Anne."

Someone called to her from behind the house. The voice drifted along the wind and tingled around her ears. It was faint but familiar. She pulled her hand back out from under the car.

"Momma?"

Betsy Anne crept down the side of the old junk car, moving towards the front of the vehicle, away from her father. The rain ran down her face and blurred her eyes. She wiped at them with the back of her hand and ran towards the corner of the mobile home. Her shirt was soaked and her feet were getting colder by the second sinking into the damp ground. She looked back and could see her father still slumped on his knees on the ground, sobbing into his hands. She looked at the open door to the trailer. The light still on inside. That was the last place she saw momma, at the table. She could get warm, and dry off, and maybe momma would tuck her in bed tight.

"Betsy Anne. I'm back here."

The voice came from behind the trailer. It sounded like her mother, and yet it didn't. There was something different about it, something weird. She glanced at the open door one last time before she snuck around the edge of the trailer towards the rear. The backyard was small, just a patch of grass with a busted-up swing set and slide before turning into more woods. Betsy Anne inched her way towards the swing set, cautiously taking each step as she looked out into the woods surrounding her.

"Momma?"

The voice was coming from the other side of the yard, past the swings, near the old shed in the corner. Her dad called it a shanty. He said there used to be a house, a real house, not one on wheels, there, but they didn't have any running water back then, so they had to "do their business" in the outhouse. The "poop palace" he'd call it, and him and momma would laugh every time. He said there was a big hole in the ground and that's where it would all go, deep in the ground. Betsy Anne didn't know whether he was lying or not, but she always stayed away from it when she played back there.

"Come here, child. There's nothing to be frightened of," the voice called again to her.

"I'm coming, momma," she said, as she slowly made her way across the wet grass. The rain had almost stopped, and she could hear her feet making sucking sounds with each step she took. She walked by her swing set, the lone swing hanging by only one chain. She gripped the chain to help her pull her foot free from a particularly muddy spot, as a light flashed from behind her.

"Betsy Anne!" Her father ran into the back as the flashlight zigzagged across the yard. The beam paused at the swing set, holding on the lone swing, the chain still swaying softly back and forth.

"I messed it up. Messed it all up real good," he said. "I'm sorry!"

He ran across the yard, inches away from Betsy Anne's new hiding spot behind the sliding board. She watched as he crashed through the woods behind their house, the flashlight shining wildly into the air, branches and limbs snapping as he ran.

"I'm sorry," he screamed, as he ran farther into the woods. "I won't ever hurt you or your momma ever again!"

She stayed hidden behind the slide, trying not to breath too hard or make any noise. Eventually, she couldn't hear him anymore and his light was gone.

“He’s gone, child. It’s safe.”

Betsy Anne turned back to the shed. The voice was coming from inside there. She rose up from behind the sliding board and moved towards the voice. As she got closer, she could see the door to the shed was open a crack, but it was too dark to see anything inside. She stopped in front of the door and paused.

“Momma? Is that you?” she asked.

“Who else would it be now, child?” The voice soothingly said.

“You don’t sound like momma,” Betsy Anne answered. “I’m scared.”

The door opened a couple inches wider. The squeak from the hinges hurting Betsy Anne’s ears as she winced. She could see the shadowed silhouette of someone just inside the door. She could feel them drawing her closer, wanting her to come inside with them. It was like there was an invisible rope around her waist pulling her towards the shed, like if she dug her heels into the mud, it would still drag her forward.

“There’s no need to cry, sweet child,” the voice cooed. “I have your momma right here with me. Come closer.” A soft humming came from inside, like a child’s lullaby, rising and falling in pitch.

Betsy Anne could feel herself taking step after small step towards the door. Her body felt weird, light, almost like it was floating. She looked down at her arms and all the hairs were raised up from her skin, like when she rubbed a balloon against her shirt. She looked back to the woods where she last saw her father.

“Daddy!” she screamed.

“Shh. Shh. Shh. Hush now, child,” the voice hissed. “We don’t need no distractions here now. I promise to keep you warm and safe, and bundled up tight.”

Betsy Anne stood before the old wooden out house, the door wide open. She saw the crescent moon cut into wood, the crude handle below it, and the scratches all along the frame. She choked at the smell of decay coming from inside.

“I want my momma,” she gasped.

“Don’t we all,” the voice answered.

In a blur, an arm reached out from inside the blackened space, grabbing Betsy Anne by her night shirt and pulling her off her feet and inside the tiny shed.

The storm had blown over and the rain stopped, leaving an eerie silence in the back yard until something crashed inside the trailer.

“Betsy Anne!” The woman’s voice called out.

Clara stumbled into the backyard, holding onto the side of the trailer for support. She looked a bloody mess, with one arm hanging limply down to her side. She searched the yard for any sign of her daughter.

“Where are you?!” she cried.

She saw the swing set and the broken swing, still softly swaying in the night. Her gaze turned toward the shed in the corner. The door creaked and then slammed shut as she watched.

“Betsy Anne,” she yelled. “Momma’s coming.”

Clara took a dozen steps across the yard before collapsing face first into the muddy ground. She reached towards the corner of the yard.

“Momma’s coming...”

Blood pooled around her face, mixing with the rain water, as she slowly bled out onto the ground. She softly closed her eyes and let the darkness take hold.

THE PLACE I BELONG

The dark sedan weaved along the small country road, making its way down a long, curvy hill. An older man, in his mid-60's, and dressed in a collared shirt sat behind the wheel, adjusting the radio tuner. The speakers blurted out an assortment of entertainment choices, music, news, politics, until finally stopping on a church sermon about the power of the devil in modern technology. Social media was best friends with Satan, apparently, and they were both coming for your kids' souls. Seemingly satisfied with the choice, the man returned both hands to the wheel.

The announcer rambled on about electronically stealing souls through selfies, and the hazards of hashtags, and analog salvation, until the driver finally turned his head to his young passenger.

"It's all true you know," he said, raising his eyebrows. "The internet is the informational superhighway leading straight to hell."

Hardlee sat in the passenger seat, staring out the window at the passing foliage. For a 13-year-old kid, his choices were either daydreaming or listening to the giga-byte gospel. Even with his eternal soul on the line, it really wasn't much of a decision.

"Sorry, Father Ron. What did you say?" He asked as he pulled his forehead off the window glass.

The clergy man grumbled a bit, apparently disheartened to be ignored even with such a captive audience, but he just sighed and decided to move on with the conversation.

“Never mind. We’re almost there, anyway,” he said. “How long has it been since you’ve visited your family out here?”

“Ummmm...pretty much never,” Hardlee answered. He’d only met Father Ron a few weeks ago, and he still wasn’t sure how to act around him. Sure, he seemed nice enough, but Hardlee was getting a pretty quick education as far as the real world went, so he wasn’t very quick to trust new people, even ones wearing white collars.

“I see,” Father Ron answered. “Well, family is family, son. I’m sure things will work out just fine. You have to have faith, my boy. The Lord will show you the light.”

Faith. Yeah. That’d been working out pretty well for Hardlee so far. Pretty much his entire world had fallen apart in a matter of months. Back then, he had a family, a house, friends, stuff. All that changed in the blink of an eye when his mom died from COVID. In three weeks, she went from cooking his favorite dinner and helping him with homework, to him and his dad standing at her hospital bed saying their last goodbyes. It didn’t seem real to him. He still expected her to just show up and take him home.

Hardlee looked at a billboard as they passed. There was a man in a cowboy hat standing proudly with his chest puffed out. A gold sheriff’s badge hung from the lapel of his suit jacket. It looked like he was grinning right at Hardlee, but there was something sad about him too. Something in his eyes.

“Morgan County welcomes our new sheriff – Rowland Thunder!” Hardlee read out loud. He chuckled when he saw someone spray painted an additional message, “Go Home, Piggie!” complete with a cartoon pig face.

The car crossed a metal bridge. He could feel the tires vibrating against the metal. At the end, there was a new sign – “WELCOME TO PAW PAW, WV”, and next to that was one for the Paw Paw Welcome Center. It was just a simple old cement block building off to the side of the road. There were no cars parked out front and no signs of any activity around it. Maybe it should be the “sort-of-welcome-center” Hardlee thought.

“Some good God-fearing folks around here, Hardlee,” Father Ron grinned. “I’ve got a good feeling for you.”

Father Ron pointed out the window as they passed a turnoff on their right.

“Back there is the Paw Paw Tunnel,” he added, apparently set on giving Hardlee a quick tour of Paw Paw. “Do you know anything about the tunnel?”

“Why would I?” Hardlee replied. The man knew he’d never been there before.

“Fair enough,” Father Ron said. “Here’s some facts about it. The tunnel was constructed using more than six million bricks and was started back in 1836, but it didn’t open until 1850. Why did it take so long to get it open, you’re probably wondering?”

“Umm, nope. Actually, I didn’t...”

“It was because of how difficult a task it proved to be,” the father continued. “Also because of all the violence connected with the construction. They said the immigrants they brought here to build the tunnel would have fights, bloody feuds, burning buildings, and even more. There were an unprecedented number of deaths and missing persons associated with the construction of the tunnel.”

“Umm, wow,” Hardlee replied as nonchalantly as possible to show his disinterest.

“Wow, indeed,” Father Ron nodded in agreement, totally missing the attached sarcasm. “The tunnel was closed for a while because of landslides and the such, but I hear it is open again and quite the tourist spot for hikers and bicyclists. You’ll have to make sure to visit it.”

“I’ll put it on my list,” Hardlee said, thinking he preferred the digital demon sermon.

Father Ron looked over at Hardlee and grinned. “People take the land around here seriously, son. There’s a sort of mutual respect they share. The land has provided for them, given them industry and food, and they respect it for that. I wouldn’t be too quick to dismiss it if I was someone new to town and trying to fit in. Don’t take it too lightly is all I’m saying.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.” Hardlee replied. Maybe Father Ron didn’t miss that sarcasm after all, he thought.

The car continued down what Hardlee assumed was the main street in town. There was a gas station / convenience store, an old church on the hill, the town hall which doubled as the police station, a barber shop, a couple local restaurants, and an old hardware and general merchandise store. What he didn’t see was a fast-food restaurant, or shopping mall, or bowling alley, or anything fun to do at all.

The realization of this becoming Hardlee’s new life sank in with every

building they passed and country corner they navigated. He cursed his father under his breath for putting him in that situation.

“What was that?” Father Ron asked.

“Nothing.”

The car travelled through the town and eventually back onto the same winding roads they found leading into it. About a mile outside of town, they turned onto a dirt road, heavy with potholes. Even in that big sedan, Hardlee could feel the wheels dipping deep into each crevice. They stayed on that road for several minutes, even taking a turn at a fork in the road. Hardlee couldn’t believe more than one person decided to live back there. Just when he thought for sure they must have taken some kind of wrong turn, he heard dogs barking in the distance. He saw a house in the woods and heard the barking grow louder. They slowly wound up the narrow road, making their way to the home. He hoped the road may just keep going, but it ended right there.

“Is this it?” Hardlee asked, already knowing what the answer was.

“Give them a chance, Hardlee,” Father Ron looked over at him. “Some of the nicest people I’ve ever met have had dirt floors in their homes.”

“Yeah, well, why don’t you live here then,” Hardlee mumbled to himself, getting out of the car and opening the back door to get his suitcase.

The house was in a state of disrepair, missing shutters, cracked windows, paint peeling from the exterior walls. The roof had been patched in multiple places and a large blue tarp was covering a portion of it. There was a barn off to the side that looked like it would fall over if someone pushed hard enough, with as many boards missing from it as there were present.

An old man with a long grey ponytail was riding a beat-up green lawn tractor and coming around the side of the house. He didn’t appear to be cutting any grass with it, but was heading straight towards them.

Father Ron and Hardlee stood patiently outside of the car with his suitcase at his feet, watching as the mower approached them. The man operating it was in his late 40’s, balding, with a scruffy beard and a big chew of tobacco in his cheek, which Hardlee only knew because the man spit a giant black wad of it on the ground as he rode up to them. He wore a pair of faded overalls over a once-white, now multi-stained t-shirt. The lawn tractor sputtered to a stop in front of them like it was gasping for its last breath, but the man remained seated.

“Mr. Harker?” Father Ron took a step towards him with his hand outstretched.

“Who’s asking?” the man replied, eyeing the father suspiciously.

Father Ron hesitated and then continued, “We spoke on the phone, I believe. This is Hardlee. Your nephew.”

The man eyed Hardlee up and down twice and responded with a resounding grunt, then turned toward the house and hollered, “Kid’s here!”

As if on cue, a woman came bursting out of the house. She was also somewhere in her late 40’s and wore a well-stained apron over top of her “house dress”. As soon as she saw Hardlee and Father Ron, her smile beamed across the yard.

“He’s here,” she exclaimed as she rushed off the porch and embraced Hardlee, sinking his face into her ample bosom! “Ohhh! I just can’t believe you’re actually here!”

“Ummphhh,” Hardlee replied weakly. Her dress smelled like bread dough and Lysol.

Freeing himself from his aunt’s chest, Hardlee noticed a few new faces had joined them. There was a young boy about his age with a wild mane of hair flowing from his head. The boy was dressed in cut off jean shorts and a “Morgan County Fair” t-shirt. The other boy next to him was a few years younger and hid behind the other’s shoulder, peeping out only long enough to get a look at him.

“I’m Aunt Bonnie,” the woman beamed. “You already met my husband, Hal, and these are our two boys, the older one’s JayBird, and that’s his brother, Dewey.” She spoke loudly to be heard, but had a warmth and tenderness to her voice also. Hardlee immediately liked her.

Aunt Bonnie ushered Hardlee over to the boys for a proper introduction.

They responded with an acknowledging head nod to each other.

“I just know you boys are going to be great friends,” she gushed.

“Hey,” JayBird responded, looking Hardlee up and down just like his father had.

“Hey,” Hardlee replied.

“What am I supposed to be? Chopped liver?” Another voice called out from the porch, and Hardlee turned to see what he figured had to be the oldest woman alive on the planet. She shuffled across the porch floor using a walker with two filthy tennis balls jammed onto the front legs.

“We could never forget about you, Gram Gertie.” Aunt Bonnie smiled and pointed her arm in the old lady’s direction. “Hardlee, I’d like you to meet your great-grandma Gertie.”

“Hardlee? What kind of name is that? Sounds like a sissy-boy,” Gram Gertie snapped as she squinted her eyes to get a good look at him.

“Gertie!” Aunt Bonnie said. “Hardlee is going to be living with us...for the time being at least.”

“Yeah, about that,” Hal said, turning to Father Ron. “You know, I get tragedy and all that. Hell, we’ve had more than our share round here, but putting food on the table ain’t exactly easy.”

The father handed Hal a white envelope. Hal took it and slid it into his back pocket. “The church appreciates you helping out Hardlee and his family in their time of need, sir.”

“Hrumph,” replied Hal as he turned and got back on his mower chariot.

Father Ron turned to Hardlee and shook the boy’s hand. He knew it would be the last time he ever saw the man.

“Hardlee, you take care of yourself. These are good people. They’ll watch out for you. You hear me, son?”

“Yes, sir,” Hardlee replied.

“That a boy,” he smiled at him. “Remember, God is there for you. You just have to let him in.”

Hardlee watched Father Ron get back into his big sedan and pull away from the house, leaving a dust cloud behind him. He could feel a chapter in his life closing as he watched the car drive away. He hoped what was ahead of him was better than what he was leaving behind.

SHANTY RED

“Good riddance,” Gram Gertie hissed from her perch on the porch. “All them church types make me nervous. Buncha petal-flies.”

Aunt Bonnie was quick to jump in. “Don’t mind her much, Hardlee. She watches too much of that CNN. Warps her brain.” She picked up his suitcase and handed it to JayBird. “Jay, honey, take Hardlee inside and show him his room.”

“Yes, mamma.” JayBird looked back at Hardlee, waiting for him on the porch. “Well, come on then.”

“Coming,” Hardlee answered, glancing back towards the road one last time, as the dust from the sedan had all but vanished.

COOP DE VILLE

Hardlee tossed his suitcase onto the tiny cot wedged into the corner of the back room. Based on what he saw from the outside, he knew not to expect much. He was raised in a “company” house in Southwestern Pennsylvania, which was pretty much where one house was separated into two halves for the families of the men working the mines in those areas. They called the little towns filled with these homes coal patches. Each “patch” was centered around a local mine and had their own schools and a company store, where the miner’s wives could spend their husband’s hard-earned paychecks on goods and groceries provided by none other than the same people who ran the mines. It was a pretty good racket, at least that’s what his father called it.

Of course, that was years before Hardlee lived there. By the time he came along, all the mines had been closed for a long time. The last remaining coal miners had died, usually at an early age, leaving behind their widows and children. Hardlee was a transplant of sorts. His grandfather wasn’t a miner, but instead he worked for the railroad police but took up residence in the patch all the same. His grandmother was a proud woman and spent her entire life building a home for her family there.

Patch life at Hardlee’s age was pretty idyllic, with long days of adventures in the surrounding woods, exploring the abandoned mines, riding bikes along the ash dumps, or having Christmas tree camp fires in the local coke ovens. He felt safe there. He felt like he was a part of something. Hardlee bent his elbow and looked down at a couple small blackened lines running up the skin along the back of his forearm, ash-infused scars from wrecking his bike on the ash dumps. They were like a patch tattoo of sorts, reminding him where he came from. He was always kind of proud of them.

The Harkers had cleared out a small place in a back room for Hardlee. It was barely bigger than a closet, but there was room for his cot and a small dresser for the few things he brought with him. There really wasn't much else he needed. There was a window looking out back covered with worn brown curtains. Hardlee dug a small folding knife from his front pocket. It was nothing special, just a run of the mill lock blade with a brown handle showing a cowboy riding a horse. His dad carved Hardlee's initials in the side of it the one and only time he ever took him fishing. They caught three blue gills that day. It was one of his fondest memories.

"You settled in yet?" JayBird asked, pulling back the curtain separating Hardlee's room from the rest of the house.

Hardlee looked down at his unopened suitcase on the bed.

"Close enough," he replied.

"Come on then," JayBird said. "I'll show you around."

He followed his cousin down the hall. JayBird paused and pointed at a closed door.

"That's where me and Dewey sleep," he said. "I want my own room, but he gets awful scared at night and likes me being close. You got any brothers?"

"Nope. Just me," Hardlee answered.

"Lucky."

Cutting through the kitchen, they made their way towards the back door. The oven door was ajar and the most wonderful smell poured out of it. Hardlee stopped to take a deeper breath and soak it in.

"What is that?" he asked.

"That? Fresh bread. Momma makes it a couple times a week," JayBird said, grabbing Hardlee by the wrist. "Come on. Quit being a weirdo."

Pushing open a tattered screen door with the bottom screen knocked out, JayBird practically pulled Hardlee into the back yard. He stopped and held out his arm like he was displaying a work of fine art.

"Here it is," he said, looking back to wait for Hardlee's reaction. "What do ya think?"

“It’s...pretty cool,” Hardlee lied. What a dump he thought. There were weeds growing everywhere and the grass, what little there was, hadn’t been cut in possibly forever. The riding mower JayBird’s dad was on must have really only been used for transportation. What was left of a busted-up trampoline was lying in a corner of the yard. There had to be a half-dozen other old lawn tractors in different stages of decay just randomly parked throughout the grass. Large pieces of metal and machines parts were everywhere. Hardlee had to watch where he stepped when he followed his cousin across the yard.

“Yeah. It’s a mess,” JayBird said, grinning back at him. “But I spend most of my time in the woods or in town.”

“How far away is town?” Hardlee asked.

“If you take the tracks on your bike, about ten minutes,” JayBird answered and waited, just looking at Hardlee. “Yeah. Don’t worry. I got a spare bike you can use.”

“Thanks.” Hardlee pointed to an old wooden shed at the back of the property. It looked like it had seen better days. “What’s that?”

“That’s the old out house,” JayBird said. “Don’t got no use for it no more, Pa said. He always talks about tearing it down, but he never does.”

Someone grabbed Hardlee by his arm. He felt fingernails digging into his skin as he spun around.

“Listen here, boy!” Grandma Gertie was next to him with her walker.

He tried to pull his arm free from her grip, but she held on tight. She was a lot stronger than she looked, plus he was jolted by her sneaking up on him like that. He tried to take a step back towards JayBird, as she pointed across the yard towards the old outhouse.

“You two stay away from that thing,” she snapped. “I don’t want to see either of you messing around near there.”

“It’s just an old outhouse, granny,” JayBird said, tugging at Hardlee shirt for them to go. “Ain’t nothing in there.”

JayBird led Hardlee across the yard behind a pile of old cement blocks. There were a couple of bicycles leaning against them. JayBird pointed to the yellow one with rusty rims and a torn seat.

“Come on,” Jay said. “I wanna show you something real cool.”

The boys got on the bikes and pedaled towards the wood line. JayBird looked back and waved at Gram Gertie, who had found a seat on a wooden rocker on the porch.

“Tell Ma we’re going exploring,” JayBird yelled back and waved. “We’ll be back by supper.”

Grandma Gertie yelled back at them. “Tell that boy, JayBird. You tell him to stay away from there!”

“I will,” JayBird said, as they pedaled onto a small dirt path leading into the woods.

“There’s evil in that shitter!” She screamed to the boys as they disappeared into the woods.

“Wow. Is she always like that?” Hardlee asked as they rode deeper into the forest.

“Pretty much,” JayBird answered.

They pedaled for a few minutes before JayBird locked up the back wheel of his bike and skidded to a stop in the middle of the path. “Right here!”

“Geez!” Hardlee wasn’t used to his bike yet, and it took him a little extra effort to get stopped, sliding off the path instead and down into the brush. A low-hanging limb smacked him in the face. Pushing the branch away, he climbed off his bike, letting it fall to the ground. He looked around for his cousin.

“JayBird?” he called out, but the boy wasn’t anywhere in sight. He saw his bike laying in the brush not far from where he stopped. Hardlee walked back to the bike path and looked around.

“Hey! JayBird!”

“Down here!” JayBird answered from down over a small embankment.

Hardlee followed the sound of his voice, making his way through the thick brush. Thorn bushes pinched his legs and arms as he tried to find a safe way through. He bent down to make it under a bush and the jiggers pushed into his

shoulder and neck, pulling him back. Every time he pushed forward, the tiny pricks would dig deeper into his skin.

“Ouch,” Hardlee yelled. “I think I’m stuck.”

Hardlee stood there motionless, bent over at an awkward angle in the middle of the brush, afraid to move and sink the stingers in even farther. He heard a loud crashing sound coming towards him from the side. It sounded like it was coming straight at him, breaking and crunching and snapping the limbs around him. His first and most terrifying thought was a bear, though he guessed there were multiple animals in those woods that could end his life. Then, all of sudden, the sounds stopped.

“Hello?” he asked, still bent down looking at the ground.

As soon as he spoke, the crashing started again, maybe ten feet away. He braced for the pending attack.

“Hold on. I’m coming,” JayBird said, high stepping through the brush and pushing it down with his feet. He had a large branch in his hands, using it as a makeshift machete, swatting away the limbs and bushes. He came up next to Hardlee and stopped.

“Man, you got tangled in there good,” he said.

Hardlee felt him pull the thorn from his neck and an immediate sense of relief rushed over him. He stood up straight again.

“That one’s gonna bleed a bit, but it ain’t too bad,” JayBird said, turning to head back the way he came. “Quit messing around. I wanna show you this.”

Hardlee followed the boy back across the path. He ran his hand across the back of his neck and looked down at the blood on his fingers. “You sure we shouldn’t head back? I don’t want to get in no trouble.”

JayBird disappeared again down over a small hill.

“It’s right here,” he called up.

Hardlee made his way down to his cousin, watching his footing on the way down. JayBird was waiting and was pointing at a bunch of large stones piled together in the brush. To the left was a small brick one-story building missing the roof and windows. It looked like it had been abandoned a long time ago.

“Okay. What exactly am I looking at, JayBird?” Hardlee asked.

JayBird grinned. “That’s an old entrance down into the mines.”

“What mines?” Hardlee asked.

“Those,” JayBird answered, pointing. “They run all through these parts.”

“And you go down into them?”

“Well, sort of,” JayBird said. “There’s an opening you can crawl through over there, but it’s pretty dark inside. I took Pa’s light in it once and made it maybe fifty feet inside.”

“Cool.” Hardlee looked closer for the opening JayBird was talking about. “We should check it out sometime then.”

“Definitely,” JayBird agreed.

“What’s that over that?” Hardlee asked, pointing to the roofless brick building.

“That?” JayBird said. “It’s the old lamp shanty. Pa said that where’s the miners would keep their lanterns and stuff when they weren’t down in the mines.”

Hardlee walked closer. He found where the door used to hang, then just an open space, and he walked inside. There were weeds and vines growing over the rough cement floor. Several metal hangers were still attached to one of the walls, which was where Hardlee guessed the miners hung their equipment. In the middle of the space, someone had constructed a crude fire pit using loose bricks and stones from the building. There was charred wood inside the pit. Empty beer cans littered the ground all around. The inside walls were spraypainted with graffiti, different names, professions of true love, and a few cartoon characters. Hardlee stopped at one wall where he noticed a pentagram, “666”, and some other weird symbols he wasn’t familiar with.

“What’s up with this?” he asked.

“That? It’s nothing. Kids like to come back here and act a fool is all,” JayBird said, looking at the symbols. “Especially around Halloween. They like to say the devil lives down in the mines and is gonna come out and get you.” He turned his hands into claws near either side of his face. “Gonna eat your soul!”

Something reflected in the sun near Hardlee's feet. He bent down to pick it up.

"Hold on," Hardlee said, pushing away some leaves and debris. There was an old coin there, half-buried in the soil. Hardlee dug it free using a stick. The one side of it showed three skeletons, one covering its ears, the other covering its eyes, and the last holding a bony finger up to its mouth. The date on the coin read "1879". The top corner was covered in something sticky and red.

"Lucky!" JayBird said. "I can't believe you found that."

"Is that blood?" Hardlee asked.

"Maybe," JayBird answered. "If you don't want it, I'll take it."

"No," Hardlee said. "I'm keeping it."

He wiped the coin off on his pants legs and pushed it deep into his front pocket next to his pocket knife. Maybe his luck was changing after all.

"You want to see something else really cool?" JayBird asked as he climbed back up the hill towards the bikes.

"Can't wait," Hardlee answered, following his cousin back towards the path.

He stopped halfway up the hill and felt an odd rush of energy spread across his body, almost like adrenaline. He looked down at the raised hairs on his arm, and he could feel the back of his neck tingle. He wiped his neck with his hand and saw the bleeding had almost stopped. He glanced back at the old mine entrance and lamp shanty, almost like it was drawing him back there. He took a step back down the hill.

"Hardlee!" JayBird called back to him.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm coming," Hardlee said as he turned and climbed the hill.

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

“I’m gonna be late,” Rowland said, frantically opening random dresser doors and shuffling through the contents of each one. “They’ve gotta be here somewhere!”

He shuffled through a stack of papers on the nightstand near the bed, coming up empty. Moving across the room, he opened a large standing metal safe in the corner. Inside was another lock box with a digital keypad on top. He punched his badge number into the combination and the lid clicked open. He removed the black semi-auto pistol from inside and slid it into the holster on his waist, before turning towards the bedroom door.

“Aza,” he called. “Have you seen my car keys, honey?”

“Gee, Dad,” a young girl’s voice called back from down the hall. “I’m pretty sure I put them back after I took the car out last night to rob that convenience store and then drive around the neighborhood wasted out of my mind.”

“That’s the second time this week,” he said with a grin. “Good thing your dad’s the sheriff and can cover for you.”

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “Luckiest girl in the world.”

Aza walked down the hall towards her father’s room. “What teenager wouldn’t want to get ripped away from everything she’s ever known, just so their father can take a job in some back hills town in West by-God Virginia, where the only thing slower than the people who live here is their internet?”

“Gee, honey. Tell me how you really feel,” Rowland chuckled. He reached into a jacket pocket hanging from the back of his door. “Never mind. Got them!”

He knew it hadn’t been easy on her coming there. The divorce took its toll on both of them, and he wasn’t anywhere near over that when he was also involved in a shooting incident back at his old job, which brought on a whole new batch of scars. He really thought a fresh start was going to be the answer.

“Some great detective work there, dad,” she said, smiling at him while leaning against the door frame. “I can totally see why they hired you now.”

Four months ago, he was a homicide detective working for the city of Pittsburgh. He was knee deep in gangs and drugs and domestics. They lived in a decent neighborhood, but like any big city, it was only a matter of blocks until the windows had bars over them instead of curtains. Still, it was the life he chose and it had provided well for him and his family.

His ex-wife decided the life of a police spouse wasn’t for her about three years ago, when she left him for her podiatrist and moved to Miami. She told him she wanted more out of life than waiting to see if her husband made it home alive every night. Aza left with her for the first year, until she realized her mother’s new life plans really didn’t have a space for her. So, she came back to the ‘burgh and they became closer than ever before. That may well have been the best years for him ever.

Then, one night, he was helping out with a string of robberies in one of the local neighborhoods. Not his usual case type, but one crime really did spill into others, so he didn’t mind helping out. One of the potential suspects was a snitch he used a handful of times in investigations. He’d known the guy for years, a dope head coward who only cared where his next fix came from. He told them he’d shake the guy down and see what information he had. He called him up and arranged to meet on the west end of the city, like he’d done a dozen times before. The guy was extra-jumpy that night. He remembered his eyes, bouncing around like a couple ping pong balls, dilated like two full moons. He was nervous and evasive and seemed like he felt trapped there answering questions. It wasn’t until Rowland brought up the robberies specifically that things went bad.

He didn’t even see the gun at first, something that still bothered him, especially with all the years he’d spent on the street. It happened so fast. The snitch pulled a revolver from his waist band and fired off two rounds before Rowland even realized what was happening. He felt a round hit him in the stomach and then another to the leg. He got off a shot of his own as he went

down, but the guy was already running down the alley.

From there, it was all a blur, he heard someone yell to call 911 as he laid on the sidewalk for what seemed like an eternity, bleeding and thinking what he should have done differently. He remembered hearing sirens in the distance and then flashes of light and strange faces looking down at him. He was in an ambulance and then an operating room and then nothing. When he woke up, he was in a hospital room full of officers standing with him, but the only person he could focus on, the only one he truly cared about at that moment, was the young girl next to him, desperately clinging his hand. He remembered trying to speak and the gravel coming out of his throat instead as she looked up at him, tears still streaking down both cheeks and a big smile on her face when she spoke.

“Earth to Sheriff Putz,” she said. “Hello? Are you even listening?”

Rowland snapped back to reality. He jingled the keys in front of his face and smiled at her.

“Always, my little Azalea,” he chuckled.

“It’s Aza,” she snapped back. “Remember our deal.”

“Careful. You could have been stuck with Petunia,” he jabbed back.

After recovering from his wounds, Rowland thought his time as a police officer was over. Nothing about the job or even the city seemed the same to him afterwards, almost like it was all tainted after the incident. Then he saw the job posting for a new sheriff in a quiet little town in not-so-far-off West Virginia, and he thought it would be the perfect place for him and Aza to start over. Unfortunately, she was less excited about it than he thought.

“Who names their child after a flower?” she asked.

Rowland started down the hall.

“Let’s see...Rose, Lily, Iris, Daisy,” he said, walking down the stairs with her a few steps behind. His one leg still had a little trouble doing what he wanted after the shooting, so he walked with a slight limp.

“Okay. Okay,” she said. “I get it. Get moving.”

“Don’t rush me,” he replied. “Jasmine. Holly. Blossom,” he added as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

“Enough, already,” she said, pushing past him into the kitchen. “I didn’t know I was asking Farmer Fred.”

Rowland followed her into the kitchen. “Did I ever tell you azaleas were your grandma’s favorite flowers?”

“Only a million times,” she sighed, pouring some cereal in a bowl.

Rowland looked over at the kitchen counter and noticed a letter on top of the mail pile. It was from the local high school.

“You know, school starts up here pretty soon,” he said. “Maybe we need to go to town and pick you up some new clothes?”

“From where?” she asked, shoving a spoon full of cornflakes in her mouth. “The grain store? Are they having a big flannel and coveralls blowout?”

“We’ll go to the mall. It’s a couple counties over,” he said. “It looked pretty big.”

“Malls are for losers, dad,” she said. “Just let me pick out some stuff online. Leave me a credit card.”

“Ummm...yeah. That’s not happening,” he patted her on top of her head. “We can look tonight when I get home.”

Music started playing from his shirt pocket and he pulled out his cell phone.

“And nobody has ring tones anymore either,” she added, stuffing in a fresh spoonful of cereal. “You’re like a living relic.”

“What can I say? I’m a classic,” he said, glancing at her before speaking. “Sheriff Rowland, go ahead. Uh, huh. Where? How long ago? I’m on my way.”

He put the phone back in his pocket and turned towards the door. “Ok, I need to go. I’ll be home later.”

“What’s going on?” Aza asked, looking up at him from her empty bowl.

She never used to ask those questions before the shooting happened. Rowland always made it a rule to never bring his work home, but he understood behind all that sass, she was still apprehensive every time he walked out the door, so he figured bending the rules a bit couldn’t hurt.

“There’s a young woman, in her 20’s, down at the hospital,” he said. “It looks like someone beat her up pretty bad.” He watched for her reaction. “They say she’s going to be ok though. I’m going to get her statement.”

“Who did that to her?” she asked. “Do they know?”

The world can be a shitty place sometimes, even in little towns like Paw Paw. It’s a tough thing to explain to a kid, even though he realized Aza was aware of much more than he wanted to believe. Still, he tried to be as honest with her as he could.

“Yeah. Looks like her husband,” he answered. “He’s on the run, and it looks like he took their little girl with him. Nobody has heard from either of them.”

“That sucks,” she said as she proceeded to refill her bowl. “Be careful.”

That was the other new added routine since his incident. Aza always made sure to tell him that before he left, either in person or by text.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. “It’ll be fine.”

Rowland pointed to a bicycle lying in the driveway outside.

“Why don’t you take that new bike I bought you and head into town today and explore a bit? Who knows, maybe you’ll even make a couple friends. That would beat you sitting around here all day.”

“Who rides a bike anymore?” she answered.

“Aza,” he paused at the door.

“I’ll go. I’ll go, already. Promise.”

Rowland backed the police SUV out of the drive and headed towards the medical center. They said the girl’s injuries were pretty extensive, multiple broken bones, cracked ribs, facial contusions, and she had lost a lot of blood. She was lucky to have survived. He already ran her name in the car’s computer, and there was no history of domestic violence incidents at that address. Apparently, she’d been in and out of consciousness since she got there, going on and on about a devil in the woods and saying it wasn’t her husband who attacked her. It was something else.

He turned onto another narrow road, heading for the highway and sped up the SUV.

SHANTY RED

Adults always had a hand in a lot of the life choices they made to get them where they were. That didn't mean it justified them becoming victims, but there were usually some poor decisions that helped get them there. But the kids, the small children, they did nothing wrong other than being born. They were the truest form of victims in it all. Rowland thought about the little girl and what she must be going through. He just hoped she was alright, and that they'd locate her soon.

SKIBIDI RIZZ TOILET OHIO

“You’re out of your mind,” Hardlee yelled, staring up at his cousin from the base of a cell phone tower. He was standing in a field in the middle of nowhere.

JayBird was nearly 40 feet up the tower already and only paused on a small metal platform long enough to shout down his answer.

“It’s fun,” he said, clinging onto the metal framework and leaning back. “I bring Dewey out here all the time. He thinks I’m a super-hero.”

“I think you’re a moron! You let Dewey climb up this thing?” Hardlee asked. He knew he had just met his cousin, but that surprised him.

“Hell, no,” JayBird yelled back. “What do think? I’m stupid? He just likes to watch me from down where you are. I told him never to try this. He listens to me good.”

Hardlee took a break from watching his daredevil cousin’s ascent, and looked out to the woods surrounding them. In less than 24 hours, his entire world had changed, again. He knew nothing would be the same after his mom died, but then his dad went away, and he was left with no one. The church stepped in and he stayed with Father Ron for a week or so, until they could make other arrangements, find some family willing to take him in. That turned out to be the Harkers. He’d only met any of them about four years ago at his grandmother’s funeral. His dad called them a bunch of dumb hillbillies, showing up in a beat-up pickup truck straight out of some television show. He remembered laughing with him about it back then. He missed his parents. He missed his old life.

“Look out below!”

Hardlee barely had time to step out of the way as a large light bulb came flying down from out of the sky. The bulb hit a rock in the ground and shattered. Shards of glass flew everywhere, and Hardlee shielded his face with his arms. He felt the glass strike his forearm and something stung his cheek. He looked down and saw a trickle of blood running towards his elbow. He touched his face with his other hand and saw blood on his fingertip.

“What the hell was that for?” He yelled up at JayBird. “That cut me pretty good!”

“Well, hell,” JayBird replied. “You were supposed to catch it, dummy! That’s why I hollered first.”

There was an awkward moment of silence between the boys, JayBird hanging from the metal tower and Hardlee dabbing at his face with the bottom of his t-shirt. Hardlee knew it was a mistake coming to this place, staying with these people, having to start his life pretty much all over. Just then, a breeze blew across the field, and he turned toward it. There was a sharp smell of decay in the air. He winced. There must be a dead animal nearby, he thought.

“You, ok?” JayBird asked. “I’m sorry. I thought you were ready for it.”

“Yeah,” Hardlee answered. “It’s not bleeding that much.”

“I’m coming down to the platform.” JayBird already started his climb back down. “Meet me on it.”

“I’m not climbing up that thing,” Hardlee protested. “Are you crazy?”

“Just climb up to the first platform,” JayBird shot back. “There’s nothing to it. I’ll meet you there.”

There was no way Hardlee was stepping one foot off the ground. He didn’t care if his cousin thought he was a chicken or not. What was the sense in climbing up there? He’d just wait for JayBird to make it all the way back down. He wasn’t doing it. There was no way.

The first step onto the tower rung didn’t seem too bad, Hardlee thought. The entire thing was made of metal, painted red and white. It seemed sturdy enough. He started climbing and looked up towards the platform. The tower seemed to go up forever, touching the soft white clouds above him. He could see JayBird making his way down towards him.

Hardlee grabbed a hold of the framing and pulled himself up, so both feet were then off the ground. It wasn't that much different from climbing a ladder he told himself, and he started navigating the metal supports. He felt a bit of a rhythm as he took a small step up to the next wrung and then grabbed a new bar. He decided staring straight ahead was the best course of action, and that technique worked pretty well for him for the next several steps, figuring he had to be almost to the platform.

"Don't look down," JayBird chimed in from above. "It only makes it worse."

In response, Hardlee immediately looked down. He was about thirty feet off the ground. His left leg froze, refusing to move anymore. He pulled himself in tighter against the tower, pressing his chest against the metal and squeezing his hands tight. It didn't make any sense, but he could feel his grip on the metal start to slip. Another gust of wind blew in from the woods, and he smelled death in the air. That was going to be the end of him, falling off a cell phone tower in West Virginia and breaking his back. He'd become a local legend talked about by kids for years, and they'd come see him in the hospital like some sort of sideshow freak. The "Tower Teen" they'd call him. Hey, do you want to go see that idiot kid who fell off the old tower? What a loser! The whole thing was a huge mistake.

"Hey, c'mon," JayBird said. "I'm right here."

Hardlee looked up to see JayBird lying on his stomach on the metal platform above him. He was reaching down with his arm extended towards Hardlee.

"You can do it," he said. "You got this."

"I can't," Hardlee said. "I'm stuck. You're going to have to go get someone, like the fire department or something."

JayBird chuckled. "Ain't no way the fire department is getting all the way out here, and if I go back and get Pa, he'll beat the tar out of both of us."

"Well, you better think of something," Hardlee snapped back, clinging to the metal structure for his life.

"This is all on you, Hardlee," he said. "Sometimes, the only way out of something is moving on."

And suddenly, his cousin was waxing back wood's philosophy. Hardlee felt a tinge of anger well up inside him. Who the hell was he to tell him that? He'd

hang onto that tower for as long as he damn well wanted to. He didn't need to listen to anyone, especially not some jackass named JayBird.

"What are you going to do?" JayBird persisted.

"I'm coming! I'm coming," Hardlee hissed. He forced his right hand to let go of the bar and tentatively reach for the next one. His next step waivered, but he found the rung and had a much slower but steady rhythm again. He looked straight ahead as he climbed until he felt his cousin grab his hand.

"I got you," JayBird said, slowly helping to pull him through the access panel onto the platform.

Hardlee crawled his way across the metal grating until he was completely inside. He looked down at the ground through the grating and didn't see any way possible he'd ever make it back down from there. That was where he was going to die. It was decided.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" JayBird asked, sitting on the grating next to him.

"I think I hate you," Hardlee replied.

"Ha. Come on now," JayBird said, helping Hardlee get up into a sitting position.

Hardlee gripped the metal siderail with one arm, taking in the scenery around him. He had to admit, it was kind of beautiful. He could see for miles around them, the gently rolling hills, the higher mountains in the distance, even what he guessed was the town of Paw Paw. He felt the wind on his face, but there was no smell to it up there. He guessed they were probably too high. He felt his heart beat slowing down, and he took his first deep breath since his initial step off the ground.

"It's...kind of nice up here," Hardlee said.

"Yeah. It is." JayBird had both arms on one of the support rails, looking out over the woods. "I like it here. Makes me feel...bigger."

Hardlee looked at the platform next to JayBird and saw another light bulb, similar to the one his cousin threw at him. "So, what's up with the light bulbs?" he asked.

JayBird just stared out into the open skies around him. He seemed lost in

them before he answered.

“Yeah,” he said. “I get fifty cents for each one of those I bring to Mr. Rummel in town at his store.”

“You steal them?” Hardlee asked, a little shocked by his cousin’s casualness.

“Steal? Huh? I guess I never thought of it that way,” JayBird said. “I didn’t figure it hurt nobody. I take ‘em. The cell phone company sends someone out here to replace them. I get an ice cream and a couple comic books. What’s the big deal? Why? You going to turn me in?”

“I’m not snitching on nobody,” Hardlee said. “I just was asking is all.”

“That’s why you was supposed to catch it,” JayBird added. “Now, we’re one short.”

“Sorry.” Hardlee relaxed his own grip on the platform’s side rail a bit and looked out to wood line next to the field below. There was a couple deer in the field grazing. They stood opposite the other, facing different directions. Hardlee thought they looked so peaceful, so content. He could get used to watching them from that height. It was like he was outside of their world, just looking in.

“I’m sorry about your mom and all,” JayBird said, breaking the silence.

“Thanks,” Hardlee answered, still focused on the deer.

“Did your dad really get sent to jail for stealing?” JayBird asked, turning to look at Hardlee. “That’s what my Pa said anyway.”

It was Hardlee’s turn to keep staring ahead.

“Yeah. He was taking wire and scrap metal from places, I guess,” Hardlee said. “He took his pickup onto some company’s property one night and was loading it up. They had a bunch of scrap near their dumpster, so he thought it was ok. He got caught by security, and they pressed charges on him.”

“For stealing scrap?” JayBird looked down over the edge of the platform at the broken bulb below them before looking back at Hardlee. “No joking?”

“Yup,” Hardlee said. “Cause of the amount, he got 18 months in the county jail. Judge said he was making an example of him. My dad said he was just trying to put food on the table.”

“Damn.”

One of the deer poked its head up from the grass. It looked into the trees nearby and froze, almost like it was waiting for something. In a flash, both deer took off across the field, leaping and bounding across the ground before disappearing into the thick woods on the other side of the clearing.

Hardlee looked back to where the deer was looking. He paused and tried to focus on something standing at the edge of the trees. It looked like a man wearing a large bulky coat and big hat. He leaned a little farther over the rail. The man stepped out of the woods and turned towards the cell tower. He raised his arm and waved at Hardlee, and then started across the field directly towards them.

“You see that?” Hardlee asked, pointing over the rail at the figure. He wasn’t sure what he was seeing was real. How could the guy see them all the way up there? And why would he be coming towards them?

JayBird was busy looking the other way.

Hardlee looked back to the figure, who was now almost half-way across the field, pushing down the high grasses and heading straight for them. He felt his heart start pounding in his chest again, realizing they were pretty much sitting ducks up there. There was no way they could climb back down before the person got there. And what if the guy decided to climb up the tower after them. Then what?

“See what?” JayBird finally asked.

Hardlee turned toward him again. “There. There’s a guy in the field down there,” he said. “He’s coming right at us.”

“Where?” JayBird asked, spinning around and leaning over the rail to get a better look. “I don’t see anyone.”

Hardlee looked back at the field. The figure was gone. The path he had cut into the grasses was still there, but it just suddenly stopped. There was no trace of him anywhere.

“He was just there,” Hardless said. “I swear.”

“Probably just some hunter,” JayBird replied. “Come on. We better get going anyhow.” He stuck the remaining bulb under his shirt and tucked it in at his waist to hold it there. “I’ll go first. Going down is easier anyways.”

Hardlee paused at the access port as his cousin started the climb back down. He looked back out into the field and stared at the last spot where he saw the man. A strong breeze blew across the tops of the grasses and he could hear the echo of them hissing in the wind even at that height.

“Don’t think I won’t leave you up here,” JayBird chimed as he climbed down the tower. “You came up. You can come back down. And it gets awful cold up here at night, I hear.”

“I’m coming,” Hardlee answered. The creepiness of seeing the guy in the field and the prospect of staying up on the platform with him still out there somewhere outweighed his fear of getting back down. He found his first foothold and prayed the climb down was better than the one up.

PAGING DR. BEAT

Rowland pulled the SUV into the back of the hospital. There was a parking spot waiting for him with a special sign indicating it was reserved for police and emergency vehicles. He chuckled as he pulled in. One thing he definitely didn't mind about small town life was the respect most people had around there for law enforcement. Back in the city, he'd be lucky if he didn't get a parking ticket if he didn't watch where he parked, let alone have a space set aside for him.

The medical center wasn't large, only two floors, but it apparently had serviced the community well over the years. He'd only been there a handful of times since he took the job, but he was always taken back by just how friendly everyone was there.

He walked into the lobby carrying a cup of coffee. He approached the woman behind the desk. She was probably in her early fifties with curly brown hair and wire-rim glasses. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Why, good morning, Sheriff," she said. "What brings you here so bright and early?"

Now, it's not the Rowland didn't respect the law, or that he liked breaking the rules when it came to patient's rights, but he had to appreciate the more laid-back approach folks seemed to practice there. He handed her one of the coffees and her eyes lit up. One rule he learned many years ago, nothing greases the wheels of bureaucracy like a cup of Joe.

"For you," he said. "Sorry, I don't know how you like it yet. What was your name again?"

“Ginny,” she said with a big smile. “Two creams. Two sugars.”

“Thanks, two-creams, two-sugars Ginny. I’m looking for the girl brought in last night after the storm,” he said, taking off his hat. “She was assaulted inside her home.”

Ginny leaned in closer and motioned for him to do the same.

“What a shame,” she half-whispered. “They said it looked like he beat the girl near death. It was touch and go for a little bit with her.”

Rowland leaned back from the desk and nodded.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said. “To make sure he doesn’t get away with it.”

“Bless you,” she added before looking down at the computer monitor in front of her. She tapped a few keys on the keyboard. “She had a couple tests this morning, but she’s back in her room now. Second floor. Room 12.”

“Thanks,” he said, and walked towards the elevator before he paused and looked back.

“Two creams. Two sugars,” he said, pointing back at her and smiling.

“That’s me,” she said.

Rowland entered the elevator and listened to the instrumental music playing in the background. He was never exactly what you would call a social butterfly, but, over the years of police work, he discovered he was actually pretty good at breaking down communication walls with other service-oriented professionals. It was all about finding common ground.

The doors opened, and he stepped out right at another nurses’ station. Another older female was there waiting. He smiled at her, wishing he had brought another cup of coffee with him.

“Morning. I’m Sheriff Thunder, and I...” he said.

“You’re not wearing a visitor’s badge,” the nurse glanced up at him and snapped. “You could be anyone.”

“Ummm, well, I think maybe the badge helps,” he shot back. “It’s the big gold thing on my hip.” He didn’t want to start off on the wrong foot there, but it was easy to slip back into his “city manners”, as he liked to think of them.

“Compensate much?” she asked before standing up with her clip board in her hands. She looked down at the chart instead of him. “Come back up after you get one.”

Rowland considered his options. He decided to go with the road less travelled.

“Hey,” he said. “I mean, excuse me...ma’am.”

The nurse paused at the edge of the desk, still looking away.

“I’m Sheriff Thunder,” he continued. “Here’s my identification.”

She finally turned and looked down at the identification in his hand.

“Sorry,” she said. “I used to date a cop.”

Rowland hated to admit it, but he understood what she meant. Dating a police officer wasn’t the easiest thing, just ask his ex-wife.

“She’s three doors down the hall to the right,” she offered up a small smile. “Yeah. I figured that’s why you were here.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Just do me a favor.”

He paused.

“Catch that prick.”

He waived in acknowledgment and continued down the hall, stopping at one of the doors. He looked inside at the young woman on the bed. She was the only person in the room. Her one leg was heavily bandaged and in traction. Her opposite arm was wrapped in a cast from the shoulder down. Her face, what he could see of it outside the bandages was a crossword puzzle of scratches and cuts with one eye completely swelled shut. There was an IV in her arm, attached to a drip stand next to her bed. He has no idea if she was awake or not by just looking at her.

“Ma’am?” He waited for a response at the doorway.

“I’m awake,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. “Time to check my vitals again, I’m guessing?”

Rowland walked into the room and placed his hat on a nearby chair.

"I'm Sheriff Thunder, ma'am," he said, moving next to her bed and getting an up-close view of the damage done to her face. He'd seen a lot of beaten women in his day, and this one was up there in the top ten of the worst.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about what happened the other night, if you think you're up to it," he added, waiting patiently by her bed side. Even through the swelling and bruises, he could see the swirl of emotions in her eyes. She was playing the events over and over again in her head and wincing when she got to certain parts. Finally, she looked up at him and managed a smile.

"Sure," she whispered.

"The man who did this to you was your husband, Richard?" First step in building a case was positive identification, even in domestics. He pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. He ran the husband's driver's license on the way over in the SUV and printed it out in the car. Modern technology. He unfolded the page and showed her the image.

"Is this him?" he asked.

"That's Ricky," she answered. "But...at the same time, it wasn't him."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Ricky. My Ricky. He'd never hurt a fly," she said, making eye contact with him. "I mean, he hunted and all, don't get me wrong, but as far as laying a hand on me? Never happened."

"Okay. So, what changed?" Rowland asked, taking out a small notebook from his jacket pocket and flipping the tablet to an open page. "Does he drink? History of drug abuse?"

Rowland had already checked Ricky's criminal history. Aside from a couple drunk and disorderly charges, and a DUI from ten years ago, his record was pretty clean. No drug possessions. No prior domestics.

"He just drank on the weekends, but nothing out of the ordinary," she said. "It was something else, Sheriff. It's hard to explain."

"Take your time and try. It's important."

“He turned into someone else these last few weeks,” she said. “Someone I ain’t never seen before. Angry. Impatient. Violent. I thought maybe he was having an affair at first.”

“Why did you think that?” Rowland asked. That would at least make sense. It wouldn’t be the first time some poor girl was the victim of misplaced guilt from a spouse.

“Right before he got all weird, he went to the bar one night and didn’t come home until morning,” she continued. “I was beside myself and rightfully so, and I just up and asked him if there was another woman.”

Tears were forming in her already pitiful looking eyes, and a single tear ran down her cheek.

“And what did he say?” Rowland asked.

“He denied it. Denied it on a stack of bibles,” she said. “He told me he was at the bar and there was a strange woman there, and she hit on him, but he didn’t do nothing but drink his beers. Next thing he remembered was waking up the next morning behind the dumpster at the bar.”

“Did someone attack him?” Rowland asked. The story was starting to get a little weird. Usually, that was the point where things started coming together in an investigation.

“He swears no one did. He was drinking inside and the next thing he knew, he was waking up the next morning.”

“So, you think someone slipped something in his beer then? Did he report it?” He had to ask, but he already knew the answer.

She casually laughed and grimaced at the pain it caused.

“Call the police and tell them someone slipped him a mickey? Nah. Ricky wasn’t going to do that,” she said. “But, after that, that’s when he got more violent, more angry all the time.”

Rowland couldn’t help but wonder if Ricky was the victim of some type of sexual assault himself that night and was too embarrassed to tell anyone. Looks like the bar just made his list of places to check out.

“Which bar was this?” he asked.

“Marty’s in town,” she replied. “You think that had something to do with this?”

“Hard to say,” he answered. He learned long ago, don’t run with assumptions, but don’t ignore them either. “And you haven’t heard from him since?” he asked.

“Not a word.”

“Now, what about Betsy Anne?” he finally asked and saw the fresh tears welling up in her eyes. He knew better than to bring the little girl up first or she’d be way too emotional to give him any information.

“My baby,” she said, tears now freely streaming down both cheeks. “My little girl had to see all that hell. She didn’t deserve that, Sheriff.”

“Do you think he’d hurt her too?” he asked.

“No way. She’s Ricky’s blood,” she said, meeting his eyes with hers. “He may have been having some troubles, but he wouldn’t do nothing to his daughter.”

“But...you know we can’t find her?” He hated to be blunt, but sometimes the questions just needed asked.

“I know,” she said. “The doctors and my family have been telling me everything going on.”

“So, you’re thinking he took her with him?”

“Makes sense,” she answered. “He would have been scared cause of what he did to me, knowing he’d get arrested and they’d take her from him, so I’m guessing he grabbed her and took off. If he went up in the hills, they could be up there for a week or better, easy. There’s cabins and tents we got set up all through those woods.”

“Well, we have her listed as a missing person until she’s located,” Rowland said. “Ricky’s got a warrant out for his arrest for Domestic Battery. He’s in the computer, so if he gets stopped by any police officer for anything, they’ll know he’s wanted.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” she said, reaching over and squeezing his hand. “Ricky will have to face the music for what he done. I’m going through with the charges.”

“Glad to hear,” he said. Probably less than half of females involved in domestic abuse actually went on to testify at hearings. It was always frustrating for officers, who would get called back to the same location time and time again, and want to help, but they felt the vicious circle of the violence.

Rowland patted her hand. “Just get some rest.”

He picked up his hat and walked towards the door when she called for him.

“Sheriff,” she said.

He paused and turned.

“Find my baby, please. She’s all I got.”

Rowland smiled and nodded. “We will, ma’am. Don’t worry.”

WE NAMED THE **CAT** WHISTPERS

Ricky knelt next to the canal. He knew it was him looking down into the waters below him. It was his reflections, his eyes, the crook in his nose from taking a line drive on the pitcher's mound in eighth grade, and the gap between his front teeth. It's the same face that's been looking back at him all his life, only now, he couldn't recognize the person behind the skin. It was like someone had hijacked his body, like he didn't have control no more.

He smacked the water with his hand and watched the ripples distort his features even more, making him look more like the monster he believed he'd become.

"Fuck you, Ricky," he yelled at the scrambled image.

He looked down at his hands. He'd scrubbed them twenty times since what happened back at the trailer. He could still see her blood on them, embedded in his fingernails, staining the wrinkles in his knuckles. Even the river couldn't wash them completely clean.

He looked around. Somehow, over the course of the night, he found his way down to the Paw Paw Tunnel entrance. It was miles from his house, but something seemed to draw him there. He'd been walking for hours. He looked at the two stone staircases on either side of the tunnel's entrance, leading to a top ledge which spanned the arched entry carved into the side of the hillside. He knew the place pretty well. If you grew up anywhere around there, coming down to the tunnel was almost a ritual. He remembered learning about it back in elementary school, having picnics out there with his family when he was a boy, peeing off the top ledge when he was drunk and partied there on

weekends.

Lucky for him, it was still early in the morning, and there weren't other people around yet. He figured the law would be coming for him soon enough, but he wasn't ready for that just yet. He rubbed his blood-stained hands against his pant leg, trying to wipe away his guilt.

He looked over to the tunnel entrance, leading deep into the dark passage. They shared something in common, him and that place. They both had a history of violence. From what he remembered from school, there were a lot of people killed while they built that thing like almost two hundred years ago. A lot of men and even some women died doing it, or because of it. There were plenty of local legends about dead lock keeps and ghosts roaming around in the tunnel. In his younger days, he thought it was pretty cool. Now, he just felt sad about it.

One time, as a boy, him and his friends had built an old log raft and actually floated down the whole canal. They felt like kings of river until their raft fell apart and they had to swim for shore. He wished times were simple like that again.

It'd been years since he actually went inside it, but the one thing he always remembered were the openings in the bricks on the sides of the tunnel. His third-grade teacher, Mrs. Jones, called them "weep holes". That always stuck with him for some reason because it sounded so tragic.

Ricky found a seat on a large rock and looked up at the cloudy morning sky. He was never brought up that way. It just wasn't what a man did. Laying hands on a woman was for cowards and villains, and he wasn't either of those things. He watched his own father beat his mom mercilessly after he came home drunk on any given night. As a boy, he dreamed of growing up and getting big enough to do something about it.

One night, he finally did. His father, who worked at a local feed plant, came home hours after his shift, plastered as usual. His mother told him they had gotten a notice about the electric bill, and it was going to be shut off if they didn't pay. He remembered the rage that flooded his dad's eyes when she told him that, and he started hitting her like she was the power company herself. The first shot took her off her feet, but that didn't stop him from climbing on top of her.

Ricky watched from the bedroom hall as his father struck his mother over and over again. He screamed for him to stop, but his father couldn't hear anything at that point. So, Ricky did what any good son would do, he protected

his mother.

The baseball bat they kept behind the door was supposed to be for anyone or anything coming in from outside their home. He never really thought it would be use to protect them from each other, but Ricky's hands found their way around the grip of that bat. He was twelve years old at the time, but was big for his age and when he swung, he put all his weight into it.

The first shot hit his father square in the back. He remembered his father spun around and just looked at him, surprised at first and then the anger took over again. Ricky still remembered what his dad said as he got up off his mother.

"So, you too?"

His dad was on him in a blur, and Ricky couldn't hold him back. He was pinned against the kitchen wall and his dad was pushing the bat against his throat. He couldn't draw in a breath. He figured that was going to be the end for him right there until he saw his dad's face contort with pain and drop away from him to the floor. Behind him stood Ricky's mother, he could still see her, holding a bloody kitchen knife in her hand, her face beaten to a pulp. She saved him that day, every bit as much as he did her.

And now, he had become the exact same monster his father was. His madness had been passed on to him. He destroyed everything good around him.

"You're not a monster, Ricky." The voice, barely above a whisper, drifted in on the breeze and swirled around his ears. At first, he thought it was his own thoughts, but he realized it was coming from somewhere else.

He looked up from his rock, searching all around him. There was no one there. The woods behind him were quiet, a couple birds singing in the distance. He looked down at the stream, listening to the water rush over the rocks.

Maybe, he was losing his mind. Maybe his father was coming back to haunt him. Or maybe being a monster was genetic, and this was just fate catching up with him.

"You're not crazy, either," the voice called to him again. This time his head was already up and looking around. He tracked the sound down river, down towards the entrance to the tunnel. There was someone inside it, but he couldn't see them.

"Who's there," he called out, trying to see inside the shadows.

Ricky stood up and moved closer to the tunnel entrance. He felt a wave of cold air wash over him, remembering it was always at least ten degrees cooler inside. He pulled his shirt tighter around his neck as he walked.

“I ain’t looking for no more trouble,” he said. “I know what I done.”

He stopped about twenty feet from the entrance, staring intently into the abyss. The sun was rising on the other side of the hill, so the light only broke the very edge of the tunnel. He heard something scratching the brick walls inside and the debris trickling down to the ground. It was a hurried sound, like something crawling towards him. He took a step back and looked behind him in case he had to run for it.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” the voice said.

He moved closer in. It was definitely coming from inside. The voice was soft and feminine, soothing. He could see movement from inside the tunnel, shadows shifting and sliding.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

Ricky watched as a woman stepped out from the tunnel entrance into the morning light. She was petite, maybe five foot three inches tall, and of Asian-descent. Her long black hair was tied up in a bun on top of her head. Her features were soft, and Ricky thought she looked like one of those porcelain dolls he’d seen on a shelf in his momma’s trailer when he was a boy. She may well have been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“It’s only me,” she said, her voice still barely above a whisper. “A friend.”

She stood on the path leading from the tunnel’s walkway, wearing a simple white dress, bound around her waist with a ribbon. The dress had a floral print design, with several bright exotic flowers twisting their way around her body. As she stepped towards him, he noticed the sandals on her feet. He couldn’t help but think it was a pretty odd outfit for exploring the tunnel, but this woman was so captivating, he had a hard time thinking of anything other than wanting to take her in his arms.

“I don’t know you,” he said, a little embarrassed at his total lack of charm.

“Of course you do,” she said. “You just don’t remember.”

Ricky stared into her piercing green eyes. She smiled and he felt his knees wobble. It was as if nothing else mattered but that very moment in time. Just

the two of them standing there, transfixed by each other's stare.

"I don't remember...I don't," he stammered. "You." The realization came back to him in a flood of memories. It had been weeks ago, and he was more than a little drunk, but like a curtain being pulled back to let in the sun, the images flooded back to him.

"It was you," he said, pointing at her. "You were at the bar that night. We were talking, and then...then what happened?"

The mystery woman smiled at Ricky and reached out for his hand.

"You told me about your wife and your sweet little daughter, and how much you loved them both," she said. "And then you had to leave."

"I did?" He asked, rubbing the back of his head with his palm. "I guess maybe I did, but then what happened? Next thing I remembered; I woke up outside by the dumpster."

"I do not know," she said with a small smile. "You said you needed to return home to them. Why? Is everything at home not alright?"

"I...I kinda messed things up there," he stammered. "Messed them up pretty bad actually. I don't think I can go back."

Ricky looked into the woman's eyes, almost pleading with her. "What am I going to do? I think I should just turn myself into the police."

"Shhhh," she cooed. "That will not help you." She moved closer and again reached out with her hand. "What you need...is a friend?"

"Yeah. Yeah," he said. "Maybe you're right. I could use someone to talk to right about now."

"Take my hand, Ricky," she said. "I'll be your friend."

Ricky reached for her, hesitating only for a moment as he glanced over his shoulder one last time.

"I'd like that," he said, as he placed his hand in hers.

She led him down the path and onto the walkway running next to the canal. They entered the tunnel and Ricky looked down at the water running next to them. Her hand felt so warm in his. The hairs on his arm were standing straight

up like when he pulled a shirt from the dryer and put in on too quick. The back of his neck tingled. She gently tugged at his wrist, and they continued inside.

“But I don’t got a flashlight,” he softly protested as he felt for the wooden handrail along the path with his free hand.

“There is no need for one,” she answered. “I will guide you.”

“I don’t even know your name,” Ricky said, as he felt the coolness of the shadows wash over him.

“You may call me Lady,” she said, looking back at him as she led him deeper into the dark tunnel. “Lady of the Whispers.”

And with that, they were gone.

HE GOT WEED / HE GOT WEED

“Damn it! Not another one!”

Sheriff Thunder maneuvered his SUV around another large rock in the dirt road leading up to his supposed crime scene. This was the third one he had to almost come to a stop for before he figured how to make his way around it. He'd been on that road, which he credited as little more than a rock laden goat path, for almost ten minutes. How anyone could live that far back into the woods was still beyond him, but it wasn't the first time he had to travel back into the hills since he took the job. He'd crossed a handful of homemade bridges, driven across a shallow river, and even had to leave the SUV and climb to get to incidents already.

All the recent rain wasn't making the trip any easier. Sometimes he'd hit a puddle that was only a couple inches deep, and others he thought the water was going to start seeping in at the bottom of the doors. When they gave him the SUV, he thought it was more of a luxury thing, but it didn't take long to realize it was a necessity around those parts. He rounded the next bend and finally saw the mobile home up ahead. The road pretty much ended there. He pulled in near the front.

As far as back hills homes went, he'd actually seen a lot worse. The windows were for the most part all intact, the skirting around the bottom of the trailer was pretty much in one piece. Even the screen door was still attached with screens in the top and the bottom. That was a rarity. The trailer home wasn't that big, but more than enough space for the three people who resided there. There was an old truck on blocks in the front yard with the engine pulled out

and still on a home-made hoist above it. In the yard were a couple tires, some with, some without rims, lying around in the grass. A big black sedan was on the other side of the yard. It didn't look like it had run in years. One of the back doors was wide open. A wooden wishing well was positioned along the paving stones making up the sidewalk. A small sign was nailed to the front of it, which read 'BLESS THIS MESS'.

Rowland stepped onto the metal stairs leading up to the door. He could already see it was open a couple inches, and he wondered if anyone had been up here since the domestic happened. For all he knew, Ricky could still be inside. He reached down and used his thumb to unsnap the safety strap on his holster before wrapping his hand around the grip of his pistol. If there was anyone inside, they would surely have heard him come up the road and be waiting for him or be long gone out the back into the woods.

"Sheriff's office!" He yelled through the opening in the door. "I need to speak with Ricky. You in there, Ricky?" He paused and waited, listening for any sounds coming from inside or the rustling of leaves and branches as they ran out the back. He heard neither.

"Sheriff's office," he said again. "I'm coming in."

Rowland unholstered his pistol and kept in pointed towards the ground, in what they called the lowered ready position back at the academy. He used his boot to push the door open enough for him to get inside. He did a quick look around the edge of the door into the living room before stepping back out.

With the quick glance he took, he saw the living room was in shambles. There were tables overturned, the couch was pulled out from the wall, and glass and debris were all over the floor. There had definitely been some fighting there recently. He gathered himself and went in a second time, that time stepping into the living room and scanning as much of the interior as he could. Right next to the living room, separated by a half-wall, was the kitchen, which was equally torn apart and a mess. Broken dishes and glasses covered the floor. Assorted knives were laying on the counter and on the ground. One of the wooden chairs next to the kitchen table was smashed to pieces.

"Sheriff Thunder," he called out. "I'm looking for Ricky. You here, son?"

On the opposite side of the living room was a small hallway, which he presumed led to the bedrooms. There was a chance he would find Ricky dead with a self-inflicted gunshot wound back there.

"Betsy Anne? It's the police!" he said. "It's ok to come out. Betsy Anne!"

Slowly, he navigated his way across the living room watching where he stepped along the way. He noticed a small pool of blood at the corner of the couch. He guessed it was from the girl back in the hospital. If that same incident had happened back in Pittsburgh, they'd have had a team of investigators up there with forensics photographing the scene and collecting evidence. Things ran a little different in Paw Paw. He had one full-time deputy and one part-time, both good guys, but neither of them with any real police experience outside of that department.

Rowland paused at the hallway and peaked around the corner. He saw three doors along the hall, all on the same side interior wall. He guessed two were bedroom doors and one would be for the small utility room with the hot water tank and furnace. Years of police investigations gave him a decent working knowledge of mobile home layouts.

Staring down the hall, he focused again on every step he took, trying to stay quiet, but also making sure he didn't step on any weak spots in the floor. Get stuck knee deep in the floor once, and you learn that lesson quick. He stopped at the first door and reached for the knob. It didn't seem locked. He twisted the knob to the side and then pushed the door open, raising his pistol at the same time to follow wherever his eyes went inside the tiny room.

A plastic princess bed was wedged in the corner, next to a bookshelf full of kid's DVD's and an old box-style television. The floor was littered with dolls and toys. It looked like he found the little girl's room and it was clear. Thank God. Nothing seemed disturbed or damaged there, unlike the rest of the house, which he took for a good sign.

He crept down the hall to the next door. It was noticeably smaller than the last one. He twisted the knob and pulled the door towards him. The furnace hummed in the corner, opposite the breaker box, which was mounted to the wall. Something was scratching at the ceiling above him and he glanced up, listening to it cross the roof above him and then fall silent. Probably a squirrel making a nest somewhere up there and he just spooked it.

Rowland made his way to the last door, which he figured by process of elimination was the master bedroom. The door was open and had recently been kicked in. There was debris and pieces of wood still in the hall. He paused and listened. It was faint, but there was definitely music coming from inside the room.

"Shit," he whispered to himself.

He stood there in the tiny hallway motionless. Hallways were a police

officer's worst nightmare. They called them fatal funnels, because if things went bad, there really wasn't anywhere for the officer to go. They tried avoiding being put in those types of situations at all costs, but sometimes, it was unavoidable. Rowland ran a half-dozen scenarios through his head while standing there. Maybe the little girl, Betsy Anne, was in there watching cartoons, or maybe Ricky had been waiting for the police to show up all night and fell asleep with his shotgun in his lap. Or possibly Ricky was in there with his head already blown off, or both him and the little girl were in there dead. Or maybe someone just left the television turned on. He liked that one.

Something inside the room thumped, like a heavy object hitting the floor.

"Aw, fuck me," someone said from inside.

So much for the television theory, Rowland thought. Then it got tricky. If he announced himself again and Ricky was waiting in there with a gun, he could blast through what remained of the door and Rowland would never even see it coming. He knew he couldn't stand in the hallway all morning either. Time to make a decision.

Moving with practiced smoothness which came from a hundred prior scenarios and room clearings with what academy instructors liked to refer to a muscle memory, Rowland kicked open the partial door with his foot while bringing his service weapon up and on target in a two-handed grip. His eyes met his target immediately.

"Sheriff's Department," he yelled. "Let me see your hands!"

There's that moment when you're a police officer and you find yourself in a tense situation that you know can go either one of two ways. This was one of those times.

The man was standing in the bedroom facing the corner of the room. Rowland couldn't see his face, or more importantly his hands. He had no idea if the man had a weapon or not. He was dressed in dirty black sweatpants and a baggy hooded sweatshirt. He didn't react to Rowland's verbal commands. He just stood there, facing the wall.

"I said, let me see your hands," Rowland barked a second time. "Do not think I won't shoot you."

Rowland stood there for a long moment, watching the figure in the corner of the trailer, gently swaying back and forth. He noticed something red in one of his ears, and then it all made sense to him. The man spun around and threw

one hand in the air, his mouth wide open as he screamed.

“If you could be mine!” he yelled. “I’d be king of your hill!”

Rowland jerked back but held his ground, still pointing his weapon at the man. He could make out each of the earbuds now. The man was holding a glass bong in one hand and pointing to the ceiling with a cigarette lighter in the other. His eyes were closed tight.

“Jesus,” Rowland sighed. “Sheriff’s Department,” he screamed again. This time the man’s eyes popped open as quickly as his jaw dropped.

“Oh!” the man yelled. “Mother Fucker!”

The guy was definitely not Ricky. Rowland was sure from the driver’s license picture and demographics he had on him. Still, there were some questions he needed answered.

“Who the hell are you?” Rowland yelled.

“What?” the man yelled back.

With one hand, Rowland pointed to one of his ears repeatedly.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, man,” he said, pulling out both ear pieces with his non-bong hand.

“Who the hell are you?” Rowland snapped. His patience was wearing a little thin, especially after just wondering if he was going to have to shoot this guy.

“I’m Matty,” he replied. “I’m Clara’s brother!”

Rowland lowered his pistol, pointing it at the floor.

“Where’s Ricky?” he asked.

“Ricky?” Matty shrugged both shoulders. “Shit if I know. He beat the shit out of my sister and took off. Didn’t you hear?”

“So, you know what happened to Clara?” Rowland asked.

“Umm...yeah. The whole holler knows.”

“What about Betsy Anne, your niece?” Rowland asked, as he holstered his

pistol.

“She’s with him, wherever that is, I’m sure,” Matty said. “He might have been acting like a major dick lately, but he would never hurt his little girl. That’s his heart.”

“So, what are you doing here then?” Rowland looked down at the bong Matty was still holding.

Matty followed his eyes down to his hands before the realization hit.

“Oh, shit!” He quickly set the glass device on the dresser next to him and shoved the lighter in his pocket. “How’d that get there?”

Rowland didn’t smell anything before or since he came into the room, and there wasn’t any smoke coming out of the bong, so he guessed he broke in on him before he had the chance to light it up.

“You snuck up here to get your brother-in-law’s stash, didn’t you?” Rowland figured it was as good as any angle to get some leverage for information. “That’s misdemeanor possession, son.”

“What? That?” Matty fidgeted around and shuffled his feet. “That’s not mine. I was just moving it is all. I don’t even know what it is. Is it some kind of art piece or something?”

“Don’t be a wise ass,” Rowland pressed. “Look, I just want Ricky and the little girl. Where are they? And we’ll forget all about your art appreciation. What do you say?”

Matty threw both hands in the air with his palms out. “Yo! Hey, I’m serious. I don’t know where they are. I’d tell you if I did.”

“I don’t believe you,” Rowland persisted.

“Yeah, well. You’re right,” Matty admitted. “I probably wouldn’t snitch, but I’ll tell you I don’t know.”

Rowland watched Matty responses. It wasn’t one hundred percent, but over the years, he developed a pretty good inner lie detector. The kid seemed to be telling the truth.

“How well do you know Ricky?” he asked.

“We played little league together,” Matty answered. “We rode bikes on the trails. He married my sister. Pretty dang well, I’d say.”

“Does he like to hit women?”

“Ricky?” Matty’s face twisted in over-exaggerated disbelief. “No way, man. Dude loves my sister and that little girl.”

“Then what the hell happened last night?” Rowland asked.

Matty paused and looked up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Something weird is going on with him.”

“Drugs?” Rowland pointed to the paraphernalia on the table.

“Hell, no,” Matty said. “I mean, a little pot? Sure. But he wasn’t no junkie or meth head.”

“Then what?”

“Last couple weeks, Ricky started acting strange,” Matty said. “He’d just stare off into space, or you’d say something to him and he just got angry. Like real angry. For stupid shit.”

“Violent?” Rowland added.

“The last week or so, I guess,” Matty said. “It was like something was growing inside him and needed to come out. I guess it finally did last night.”

The radio on Rowland’s belt beeped three times rapidly before a woman’s voice came across it.

“Sheriff Thunder? This is base. Sheriff Thunder? You out there?”

Rowland pulled the radio from its holder.

“This is Sheriff Thunder,” he said. “Go ahead, Ester.”

“Sheriff, we got a situation in town at Frankie Nelson’s store. He’s holed up inside with a customer as a hostage,” she said. Rowland could hear the panic in her voice, even though she was trying her best to stay calm. “Sheriff, he’s got a gun.”

“Anyone on scene,” he asked.

“John’s there and Tommy’s on his way,” Ester answered.

“Good. Tell them to set up a perimeter,” he said. “No one in or out of there until I get there. Get the telephone number for the store and radio it to me when you got it.”

Rowland shot a look at Matty as he headed back out into the hall.

“If you hear anything about Ricky or your niece, the first thing you do is call me? You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” Matty said, still standing in the corner. “Promise.”

Rowland ran outside and jumped into his SUV, whipping the vehicle around in the dirt lot and racing back towards the main road.

Were they fucking serious? He expected to leave those kinds of incidents behind him when he left the city. The new gig was supposed to be more smashed mailboxes and stolen turnips than fucking armed hostage situations.

The SUV bottomed out and the undercarriage struck one of the large rocks protruding from the ground as he tried to maneuver around it too fast. He felt the impact at the base of his spine.

“Dammit,” he hissed as he veered around the next road boulder.

Finally, the SUV burst free from the tiny dirt road leading back out onto the pavement. He made it to the road in less than half the time it took him to get in, but it still seemed like an eternity. Punching the gas, the tires squealed along the asphalt roadway as he raced back towards town.

Ester had radioed him back with the telephone number for the store. Both of his deputies were on scene and holding the perimeter tight. No one had heard anything else from inside the store. He was probably seven minutes still out as he raced across those the back roads and hills. He considered calling the store. Maybe he could talk him out to the deputies and avoid anyone getting hurt. It was worth a try. He grabbed his cell phone from the center console and looked down to punch in the store’s number.

Rowland glanced back up at the windshield as he crested the next hill. A man was standing on the roadway directly in his path.

“Shit!”

He spun the wheel, and the SUV jerked to the right, narrowly missing the man. Rowland looked out the side window as they passed. It was like time paused for a split second. The man was dressed in a heavy trench coat with the collar pulled up around his neck. He had on a wide brimmed hat pulled low on his head to hide most of his features. His long stringy hair hid the rest of his face. It was hard to see much else with the quick glimpse Rowland got.

Rowland spun the wheel for a hard left to compensate for swerving to miss the man. He felt the rear of the SUV losing traction with the road and spinning around behind him. He heard the chirp of the rubber sliding across asphalt as the vehicle did a complete one hundred and eighty degree turn before coming to a stop. Rowland’s hands clenched the steering wheel and it was a short minute before he took his next breath.

He looked out the windshield to where the man had been standing. There was no trace of him.

“What in the hell?” He said to himself, as he slowly drove back to the spot in the road.

He called out from his open car window.

“Hello?”

Something ran through the woods, moving away from, branches cracking as they went. He felt a rush of adrenaline course through him. His skin buzzed and tingled. He considered getting out to follow the man, but he figured they needed him more in town right then. The mystery hitchhiker would have to wait.

He spun the SUV back around on the road and raced off towards town.

SNAKE RIVER CANYON PART II

OR

HOLD MY BEER

The sun was low in the sky, barely peeking over the trees at the end of the street. It wouldn't be long until his chance had passed. Hardlee knew it was now or never if he expected to make it.

"I'm going for it," he said to JayBird.

"God be with you, brother," JayBird answered, standing nervously beside his cousin.

With that, Hardlee raised up high, coming down on the pedal of his bicycle with all the force and gravity he could muster. The bike jerked forward, and he knew there was no turning back. He pedaled as fast and furiously as he could, forcing his legs to push down faster and faster with each new revolution. He gripped the handlebars tight as the bike swayed back and forth as he picked up speed.

Staring down sidewalk, he eyed his prize.

Him and JayBird spent nearly an hour making what they both considered to be a damn near perfect bike ramp. JayBird found the wood for the actual ramp part against a dumpster in the alley next to the local laundry mart. They figured

out how to raise it using an intricate system of a cement block and strategically placed smaller boards stacked on top of each other. It was pretty much NASA quality.

The object to be jumped was the base of a broken orange construction cone they found on their way into town and somehow knew it needed to be leaped over with a bicycle.

Hardlee felt the wind stinging his eyes with the blinding speed he was building on his approach. His only fear was that he may well jump too far when he finally found some air and sail all the way across the street and into the local barber shop.

Ten feet from lift off and everything felt good. He pulled back on the rubber grips of the handlebars. The trick was to pop a wheelie right before you hit the wood and went airborne to get maximum air.

One last thrust from his legs to maintain his speed just as his front tire approached the edge of the ramp. He pulled back on the handle bars with all of his might as his rear wheel crossed the threshold of no return.

For the briefest of moments, Hardlee felt the exultation of having achieved what few men before him could claim – the thrill of flight! It was in that instant when he felt everything before him was possible. There were no problems. No worries. No strange towns, strange men, or strange cousins. A slight smile crossed his lips.

Then, almost as suddenly, he felt the force of the world bringing him and his two-wheeled chariot back down to the hard reality of Earth.

His front tire struck first, slamming down on the pavement like the rubber wasn't even there. His arms shook violently, and the impact threw his body forward, ready to send him sailing over top of his handlebars. Somehow, he regained control and pulled himself back just as the rear wheel re-discovered gravity and slammed him down onto his seat. He thought his tailbone was about to shoot out through his throat as the handle bars wiggled and shook in his grasp. The front wheel wobbled violently back and forth as he struggled to regain control.

Finally, Hardlee felt himself slowing down, and the handlebars quit trying to pull away from his grasp. A small rush of relief washed over him, as he glanced up to see the approaching curb.

“Shit!”

The front wheel struck the curb and before he knew it, Hardlee was airborne a second time, though this time without his bike. He watched as his feet somehow found their way over top of his head, and he tumbled over the sidewalk and into the grass beyond. He hit back first into the unyielding ground, and it immediately knocked the wind out of him. Skidding to a stop with the help of some nearby hedges, he clutched at his chest and wheezed violently.

Hardlee turned over to his knees, thinking that would help. It didn't. JayBird ran up beside him, his face flush with excitement.

"That was freaking awesome," his cousin yelled into his face.

"Hungghh," was the best Hardlee could reply. It felt like both of his lungs were actually on fire.

JayBird gently helped him up from the ground.

"You ok, there Hardlee? You don't look too good," JayBird stated.

"F-f-fine," Hardlee answered, some air finally finding its way back into his body.

"You were in the air for like five seconds," JayBird yelled, while patting him on his back. "We should have recorded that!"

"Maybe...maybe next time," Hardlee answered, knowing full well there wasn't going to be a next time if he had anything to say about it.

Hardlee looked down the sidewalk to where he started his historic run from. To his surprise, there was someone else there. They were on a bicycle, next to the one JayBird left lying in the grass. It appeared they were waiting for one of them to look their way because as soon as he did, they started pedaling towards the boys.

Hardlee pointed down the street. "Hey, JayBird. Who's that?"

Both boys turned and watched as the mystery rider approached. They were picking up speed and headed right for the ramp.

JayBird's eyes lit up like a kid getting to watch a second fireworks display on the Fourth of July. "They're gonna jump too!" He shook Hardlee's shoulder violently as the rider approached the ramp.

In a blur, they were airborne, really airborne, as both bike wheels freed themselves from their earthly constraints and seemed to effortlessly sail into the great beyond. Hardlee stared dumbfounded as the bike floated through the

air, the front tire actually higher than the rear. It seemed to go on forever until the tires reconnected with the pavement and the bike gracefully slid to a stop right in front of them. He had to admit, he was impressed. He needed to shake that guy's hand.

Slowly removing their helmet, Hardlee's jaw dropped to the ground. He looked over at JayBird, who stared in equal amazement. He fumbled for the right word to describe his surprise as he pointed to the newly revealed cyclist.

"It's...it's..." Hardlee stammered.

"Holy Shit Balls, it's a girl," JayBird blurted.

Well said, Hardlee thought to himself.

"What's up, dweebs?" she asked, and with those three sweet words, she stole Hardlee's heart. Her hair was the color of gold, dangling just below her shoulders, and her eyes glistened like two emeralds in the sun. He knew he had to say something cool back.

"I...we...I mean, us. Ramp. Good?" He sounded like a complete idiot.

"Umm...yeah," she said back, giving Hardlee a quick once over herself. "You, ok? I think you may have hit your head harder than you thought. You probably want to get checked out."

"Who the hell are you?" Jaybird asked, cutting right to the chase. "I ain't never seen you round here before."

She simply smiled at JayBird, looking grateful for his abruptness. "That's because I haven't been around here before." She looked back to Hardlee. "How do they say it in the movies? I ain't from 'round these here parts." She giggled and extended her hand towards Hardlee.

He reached for it. He could feel the pulse in his arm like a jackhammer as their palms touched.

"I'm Aza," she said. "I'm new around here."

"I'm Hardlee," he wheezed. "I'm new around here too."

"Well, there you are," she added. "Two strangers in paradise."

Hardlee had no idea what she meant by that, but it sounded pretty damn good to him for some reason. She pulled at her hand, but Hardlee refused to let go for a second, before realizing what he was doing.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Paradise?” JayBird scoffed. “This place is a far cry from paradise. I’m JayBird, by the way,” he added, reaching for her hand. “Friends call me JayBird.”

“Nice to meet you then, JayBird.” She accepted his very formal handshake, and Hardlee felt the quick pangs of jealousy spring up.

“So, fellas, what exactly is there to do around here then?” she asked. “Other than extreme stunt riding.”

JayBird pointed down the street. “We could always head down to the river and see if we can find any diamonds or gems.”

Aza looked at him quizzically. “Diamonds?”

“Sure. Diamonds,” he said. “And other precious gems. Back in the day, they’d run boats up and down the canal bringing all sorts of stuff to folks. Sometimes, the ferrymen would fight with each other and they’d lose their loads. They say there was a big shipment of diamonds and jewels fell over in the water, and if you were lucky, you might still find one along the shore. At least that’s what my Pa says.”

“And you think we’re going to find them after all these years,” Hardlee chimed into the conversation.

“Well, sure. Why not?” JayBird asked, looking a little hurt they didn’t believe him. “Pa said when he was a boy, one of his friends found a diamond as big as a quarter! He moved to the city, cashed it in, and lived like a king!”

“Well, I’m in,” Aza said, giving JayBird a big smile. “Treasure hunting it is.”

Hardlee was skeptical, but the prospect of instant riches was hard to pass up. That and he was already looking forward to spending some more time with Aza. “Ok. Let’s go.”

Gathering up their bikes, Aza and Hardlee fell in line behind JayBird as the three of them started riding down the sidewalk. Hardlee glanced over at Aza riding next to them and thought maybe the new town wasn’t such a bad change after all.

The sound of the explosion caught Hardlee in mid-stride. The boom shook the street around them, as all three of them skidded to a stop. The glass store front of the local barber shop next to them shook from the blast.

“What the hell was that?” Hardlee yelled.

“It sounded like a bomb!” Aza said, still beside him on her bike.

JayBird was stopped with them, but then he took off on his bike, heading straight towards where the sound came from.

“I don’t know,” JayBird said, pedaling away from them. “But I’m gonna find out. Come on!”

And just like that, he took off and was already half way across the street. Hardlee looked over at Aza, who stared back at him and shrugged.

“Why not?” she asked, and off she went after him.

Hardlee paused, but just for a second before following after his two friends.

“I got a bad feeling about this,” he said to himself.

It took them about two and a half blocks and some feverish pedaling, but they rounded the corner and saw all the excitement outside one of the stores on the street. They all skidded to a stop a hundred yards short of the forming crowd of spectators. The fire whistle blared out from somewhere deeper in town and Hardlee heard a siren coming their way.

“What is this?” Aza got off her bike and climbed the base of a nearby lamp post to get a better view. “Looks like they’re all focused on that store there. The front glass is all busted out of it.”

“That’s old man Nelson’s convenience store,” JayBird said. “That’s where I get my comics from sometimes.”

“You think someone broke into the place?” Hardlee asked.

“Not in broad daylight,” Aza answered, still up on her lamp post perch. “My guess is a pipe bomb.”

“A pipe bomb?” JayBird laughed. “Why would anybody want to bomb old man Nelson? That’s dumb.”

“Well, you never know,” Hardlee cut into the argument. “Maybe someone had it out for him. Maybe he was cheating on his wife. Maybe a competitor?” He looked up at Aza and she nodded down in approval.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Maybe it was another store in town, taking away his business.”

JayBird looked back at the two of them and sneered. "Well, let's say we go inside and find out for ourselves then, smart asses. How about that?"

Ava laughed and pointed to the crowds of people in front of the store.

"Umm...we're not getting anywhere near the front of that building. Did you see all those people?"

"Who said anything about getting in the front?" JayBird said, grinning ear to ear. "Come on. I know a way in the back."

He took off on his bike again, that time heading down a side alley leading towards the rear of the store. Aza jumped down from the pole and onto her bicycle. She looked back at Hardlee and waved for him.

"Come on," she said. "We got us a mystery to solve."

"Great. All we need now is a Great Dane," Hardlee said, falling into formation behind the other two.

JayBird stopped next to a dumpster a street over and parked, well, threw down his bike. Aza followed his lead, with Hardlee coming up behind them.

"We'll need to walk from here," JayBird said, pointing to a fence at the end of the alley.

When they got to the fence, JayBird climbed up an old wooden pallet on its side leaning against the nearby wall. He used it to scale the rest of the way over and dropped down to the other side. Aza followed him step for step and they waited for Hardlee.

"Let's go," JayBird said.

Hardlee had a little more trouble with the fence scaling.

"I think I pulled a muscle in my leg when I jumped that ramp," he said, finally getting over the top. "Just hold your horses."

"We ain't got all day, Lone Ranger," JayBird yelled up to him. "Come on!"

Hardlee jumped down from the fence and felt the sting of the pavement on his feet. He looked over at Aza.

"Nothing to it," he said, as she smiled back at him.

JayBird ran to the back of the next building. As they passed the alley, Hardlee could see the still growing crowd of people out front. That was definitely the

right place. JayBird was on the ground near one of the windows working at a board placed across it. He pulled the bottom board loose.

“In here,” he said, waving to Hardlee and Aza.

Aza ran over first and he helped her through the opening. He looked back at Hardlee.

“I don’t know about this,” Hardlee said, pausing a few feet away from his cousin.

“Come on,” JayBird insisted. “We sneak in. We take a look around for a few seconds, and then we’ll come right back out. I promise. Besides, you don’t want Aza to think you’re a chicken, do ya?”

“Move over,” Hardlee said. “I’m going in.”

JayBird smiled as his cousin slid in through the window. “That’s what I thought.”

Aza was crouched down on the ground waiting as Hardlee dropped down beside her. They were in some type of storeroom in the back of the shop.

“Move over,” JayBird said, as he dropped down next to them. “Come on. One quick peek. That’s all.”

JayBird crossed the room. It was lined with shelves filled with groceries and goods. They had to zigzag across the floor, making their way to the other side. There was an open door on the far wall. Hardlee could see the light pouring in from the next room. Aza came up next to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“One quick peek,” she repeated.

“Definitely a bad idea,” Hardlee said, following the two of them up to the door.

11

LET THE BLUE LIGHT SPECIAL

The wheels to the Sheriff's SUV locked up as he skidded to a stop as close to the front of the store as he could get. He got the message about three minutes out that the front window to the store was just blown out. He pushed all the limits he could from his police car in getting the rest of the way there.

Jumping out of the car just on the other side of the yellow police tape, he swooped underneath it with practiced ease and headed for the crowd of people standing on the sidewalk. He spied one of his deputies at the front of the crowd and rushed up next to him.

Some of the crowd turned to look at him as he made his way through them.

"Morning, Sheriff," one man said.

"Looks like you got a real mess here," another added.

Rowland stopped next to his deputy and noticed the bullhorn in his hand.

"Let me see that, please," he told the man.

Bringing it up to his mouth, Rowland shouted out some instructions.

"Okay, folks," he ordered in a calm but firm tone. "I need everyone back BEHIND the police tape." He waited for a moment before he repeated. "Let's go. Move it behind the yellow tape."

The crowd hesitated, reluctant to give up their front row seats to the show, but after a moment, they all complied and walked behind the yellow tape strung up using a nearby telephone pole and some parked cars. Satisfied the crowd had moved back far enough for their own safety, Rowland turned back to the deputy.

“We talked about the police tape before, John,” he said, looking him in the eye.

“I know, sir,” the deputy replied. “Just got a lot going on.”

“Give me the rundown,” Rowland said. They would address crowd control later. There were more pressing matters at hand.

“We got the call Frank Nelson was holding a customer hostage inside his store,” Deputy John said, pointing at the front of the building to accentuate the point. “I rushed down here and tried to get inside but the front door was locked. I could hear Frankie inside yelling if anyone tried to come in, he was shooting him.”

“Do we know who the hostage is?” Rowland asked.

“Yeah. Ralph Winslow.”

“Town drunk Ralph Winslow?” Rowland was surprised by that one. He hadn’t known of Ralph being active before sunset.

“Yup,” the deputy added. “That’s the one.”

“Were they fighting?” Rowland asked.

“Don’t know,” the deputy said. “Ain’t like Frankie to get mad like this though. We were holding positions and waiting for you when Frank shot the window out.”

“And you didn’t think you needed to rush the place?” Rowland asked. He couldn’t blame him. The only crimes Deputy John was used to handling were parking tickets for tourists and some occasional vandalism. “Where’s Tommy?”

“He said he was heading around back.”

“Good. We have the front and back covered then,” Rowland said.

Rowland walked to the front of the sidewalk and held up the bull horn. He glanced over at Deputy John. “Get an ambulance here at the end of the street on standby.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rowland spoke into the microphone.

“Frankie! This is Sheriff Thunder,” he said. “I need you to come on out of there. Come up to the front of the store and we’ll talk about this.”

He waited for a response.

“Frankie! I just want to talk,” he added.

“Go away, Sheriff,” a man called from inside the store. “I ain’t got nothing to say to you!”

“Doesn’t work that way, Frankie,” Rowland answered. “I don’t get to leave until we both do, so, make this easy and come talk to me. Is Ralph in there with you?”

“Yeah. He’s in here,” Frankie answered.

“Is he okay?”

“Is he okay, Frankie?”

Silence wasn’t the answer Rowland was hoping for. He didn’t know everyone in town that well yet, but he had a pretty good grasp of who they were and some background on them. Frankie and his wife had run that store for almost fifty years and many considered it the heart of the town. He lost his wife almost two years ago to cancer, but kept the door to the shop open, saying the folks in town were the only family he had left, especially since the couple never had any children. He was a kindly old man, who Rowland would have guessed would never hurt a soul.

“Frankie? I’m coming in,” he said. He looked over at Deputy John. “Stay here. Radio Tommy and tell him to watch the back.”

“On it,” Deputy John said. “Be careful.”

Rowland unholstered his sidearm and walked to the front of the store and tried the handle. John was right. It was locked. He edged up next to the shattered front window of the store and peeked inside. All he could see were rows of shelves stuffed with product. No sign of Frankie or Ralph.

“Frankie!” he announced. “I’m coming in!”

Carefully, he stepped over the window ledge. Glass crunched beneath his boots for the first few steps until he made his way across the front entrance

towards the counter and cash register. Rowland was familiar with the layout of the place. He was in there at least once a week to get groceries since he moved to town. As he approached the last row of shelves stacked with potato chips and snacks, he eased up to the corner.

“Frankie?” He called out. “Talk to me.”

“Go away, Sheriff,” Frankie answered from around the corner. “It’s all rotten.”

“What’s rotten?” Rowland asked.

“Everything,” the man replied. “I went and spoiled everything.”

Rowland held his breath and took a look around the shelving towards the register. Frankie was standing on the customer side of the counter with a shotgun in his hands. His shoulders were slumped, and he was gently sobbing. His eyes were red and swollen and his breathing was labored, almost like he was panting. It looked like he hadn’t slept in days, his hair was unkempt and sticking out on the sides.

At his feet was Ralph Winslow with a shotgun wound to his chest, lying on his back in a pool of his own blood. His dead eyes were staring directly at Rowland, and his arm was reaching toward him along the ground, like he still expected him to save him.

Rowland turned back behind the shallow safety of the shelves and took in the entire image in his mind.

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” he chanted to himself. “What say you put down that shotgun and we can figure things out?”

There was a long pause, and, for a moment, Rowland had a glimmer of hope things would work out the best they could.

“Only one of us is leaving here alive, Sheriff.”

That’s the moment Rowland knew things were definitely going to get worse.

12

TEN ITEMS OR LESS

“What do you see?” Aza asked, leaning on the back of JayBird’s shoulder to get a peek out the storage room door into the shop. Hardlee was a step behind them, but was craning his neck to get a view too.

“Ok,” Hardlee said. “It’s been a few minutes. I think we need to get out of here.”

“Shhhh,” Aza turned and hushed him with an added finger up to her lips. “Not so loud. We just got here.”

“I don’t know whether he’s talking to himself or someone else,” JayBird said, pushing the door open another half inch. “I need a better angle.”

“I see him,” Aza excitedly whispered. “It’s the old man who runs the place. I remember him from coming in with my dad a couple times.”

“Yeah, that’s old man Nelson alright,” JayBird added, “But what’s he doing with that shotgun?”

Hardlee leaned onto Aza’s back to see what his friends were talking about. He realized he was brand new to town and didn’t know Old Man Nelson from Old Man Winter, but he was starting to feel a little left out. He put one hand on Aza’s shoulder to see around her. Her hair smelled liked flowers. His finger touched the bare skin on her shoulder, and he felt a rush of adrenaline roll up from his stomach.

“Is that...,” his voice was three octaves higher than he intended. Aza

glanced back at him over her shoulder and he quickly removed his hand. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I mean, is that something on the ground at his feet?"

JayBird pushed his face into the opening a little harder. "I can't tell. Maybe."

Hardlee had a view of the upper half of the man at the counter. He looked sad, like sadder than Hardlee had ever seen anyone look before in his life. His eyes were red and swollen and his hair was a mess. The man was clenching something in his hands, but Hardlee couldn't tell what it was.

"Look what you made me do, Ralph," the man at the counter said. "Why did you have to raise your voice to me? I told you I couldn't let you put any more on your tab. But you didn't listen! Why?"

"Who the hell is he talking to?" JayBird asked, still trying to get a better look at the counter. "Is there somebody else in there?"

"He's talking to himself," Aza said from her vantage point. "At least I think he is."

"Wait a minute? It sent you in here, didn't it?" the man rambled on. "It all makes sense now. It sent you in here to get me, because it didn't want to show its face. But I got you first, didn't I, Ralph? Oh, I sure did."

"This guy is off his rocker," JayBird chuckled, pulling his head out from the door and looking up at Hardlee, who was still positioned behind Aza's shoulder. "You seeing this, cuz?"

"Yeah," Hardlee answered. "The mentally unstable man holding what I'm pretty sure is a gun. I really think it's time to go."

"I think Hardlee's right," Aza added. "This is getting a little too intense."

"Thanks, Aza," Hardlee said, sharing a quick smile with her. At least one of them understood the value of caution.

They both stepped back away from the door and turned towards the window they had all originally crawled in through. About six steps in, they both paused when JayBird called them back.

"Sonofabitch," he whisper-yelled. "Someone's dead in there."

"Where?" Aza asked as she turned on a dime, grabbing Hardlee's hand and

pulling him back to the door. JayBird had pushed the storage room door open another inch to reveal a dead body at the old man's feet.

Hardlee couldn't take his eyes off it. It was a man. He was pretty sure of that. He was laying limp against the ground like wet spaghetti at the bottom of the pot. What gave away the dead part was the pool of red liquid slowly forming under the man's body. Hardlee had seen plenty of movies with dead people and once he had to go to the funeral home with his mom and dad to "pay their respects" to a distant relative, but he mostly stood in the back of the parlor for that. He'd never seen anything like this. It seemed so random, so out of place. There weren't supposed to be dead bodies in convenience stores, or grocery stores, or just about any type of store. It just wasn't right. He felt almost guilty for peeking through the door at it.

"Ok. That's it," Hardlee said. "I'm leaving. Come with me if you want. Stay if you want. I'm gone." Hardlee glanced at Aza as he walked by her, but she was transfixed on the scene outside the door, like she was hypnotized by it. Hardlee couldn't play a part in it any longer. He got two steps away when a new voice shouted something from the other room. Hardlee froze in his tracks when he heard it.

It was a man's voice, deep and authoritative. Whoever it was meant business. Hardlee was afraid to take another step forward. Twisting his torso around, he looked back at his friends. Aza had taken a step back away from the door. She looked surprised. JayBird hadn't moved an inch and was intent on watching the show outside.

Hardlee quietly made it back next to Aza, who stood transfixed, like she'd just been given some really bad news. Hardlee was about to ask if she was alright when the same guy's voice boomed in from the storefront again. Whoever it was struck up a conversation with Old Man Nelson, who didn't seem very excited about the idea of talking.

Old Man Nelson called the other guy Sheriff, and repeatedly told him he wanted to be left alone, which, at the time, seemed like a pretty reasonable request, and Hardlee was more than happy to oblige him.

"Let's go," Hardlee said as softly yet as firmly as he could.

"No. Frickin'. Way," JayBird stayed un-wavered in his commitment.

The Sheriff kept talking to Old Man Nelson, who was saying something about rotten fruit. Hardlee gently shook Aza by the shoulder, and she snapped back from wherever she had gone.

“Aza, we need to go,” Hardlee pleaded. “Come on.”

“That’s my dad,” she answered.

Hardlee wasn’t sure what to say to that, other than stand there with a confused look on his face.

“Who’s your dad?” He finally asked. “Old Man Nelson?”

“No,” she answered, and then looked Hardlee square in the eye. “The Sheriff.”

“Are you shitting me?” JayBird squealed, louder than he probably should have, as he finally turned away from the door. “Your dad is the Sheriff?”

Both Hardlee and Aza gave JayBird an equally good shushing in response to his excited utterance.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s my father.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that?” JayBird asked.

“Oh, gee. I don’t know,” she said. “It’s not usually something I just bring up when I first meet someone. Hi. I’m Aza. My dad’s the new Sheriff. Want to hang out?”

“Jaybird, it’s time to go,” Hardlee insisted. “This is getting way too serious.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Jaybird conceded. “I suppose you’re right. Let’s get.”

Hardlee sighed in relief and nudged Aza by her shoulder to prod her along.

“He’ll never even know we were here, Aza,” Hardlee said, waiting until she started towards the window. “It’ll be fine.”

JayBird took the lead, turning back towards them as he crossed the storeroom floor.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just like ninjas.”

And with those words, his next step found what had to be the creakiest floorboard on the eastern seaboard. They all froze in their tracks, none of them believing what had just happened.

Hardlee snapped at his cousin, "JayBird."

"Sorry," he answered.

Hardlee heard Old Man Nelson out in front of the store.

"What the hell was that?" the man asked, and then there was a pause. "It's here, ain't it? It finally come for me!"

Hardlee heard the Sheriff yell for the old man to stay where he was, but then he heard footsteps coming their way.

"Hide," Hardlee said. "Pointing to a dark row of shelves off to the side."

The three of them hurried across the back room to the shelved area Hardlee had pointed out. JayBird went in first, then Aza, and finally Hardlee pushed in behind them just as the door to the storefront burst open.

Hardlee nudged his friends deeper down the storeroom aisle until they reached the back wall. They crouched down near the floor and huddled together like scared rabbits. Hardlee could see the man's legs as he walked deeper into the room, slamming the store room door closed behind him.

"I know you're in here," the man yelled. "I can smell your rotten breath!"

The barrel of the shotgun dragged along the floor as the man walked deeper into the room.

Hardlee glanced over at Aza, who was holding her hand over her mouth to keep from making any sound. JayBird was a mix of emotions. Hardlee could tell he was struggling between flight or fight. Hardlee held his finger up to his lips to calm his cousin down, which seemed to work as he nodded back to him.

The Sheriff's voice called out from the other side of the stock room door.

"Frankie? Come on, now," he said. "There's no way out of here. I got guys in the back too."

Hardlee watched as Old Man Nelson's legs made their way past the shelves, heading straight for them. The lighting wasn't great in the room, but Hardlee doubted it was dark enough to hide them where they were. A bottle on a bottom shelf next to them fell and clanged against the floor.

Hardlee looked down at the glass cylinder spinning in slow circles before looking up into Aza's face, which was a mix of fear, confusion, and apology.

"You can't hide from me," Nelson screamed. "I'm sending you straight back to Hell where you belong!"

Hardlee heard the shotgun rack in a fresh round as he watched the man's legs turn the corner to the aisle they were hiding in. What he looked up into was the face of pure madness. Any trace in the man's eyes of sadness or confusion was gone, replaced with rage and unrelenting anger.

Multiple things happened at pretty much the same time at the point.

To his own surprise, Hardlee turned to cover and protect Aza with his own body, who was in tears and screaming behind him. JayBird, to his credit, was pushing past the two of them as he started his Custer-like charge toward the madman with the shotgun. Next to them, the door to the storeroom was kicked open by the Sheriff, who already had his weapon drawn and was yelling commands.

"Nelson! Drop the weapon!"

Hardlee watched as the old man raised the shotgun up to his shoulder and bent his head to the side to take aim. A smile crept across his face.

"There you are, you sneaky son of a bitch," he said. "I finally got you."

The sound of gunfire is a frightening thing, but to hear it while a gun is actually pointed at you in the dark and in a relatively closed in space like a back storeroom, it may well have been a canon. Hardlee did the only thing he could think to do, and pulled Aza closer to him, waiting to feel the bullet strike.

Instead, he heard the old man cry out in pain, falling to the side and dropping the shotgun to the ground in the process. The end of the aisle was replaced with a new silhouette as the Sheriff rounded the corner with his pistol drawn in one hand and his flashlight in the other. He did a double take between looking at Old Man Nelson, who was then on the ground and the three of them at the back of the stockroom aisle.

JayBird had made it to his feet and was halfway down the aisle when the sound of the gun discharging stopped him dead in his tracks. Hardlee was still on the ground holding Aza. The Sheriff's light found JayBird first.

"I'm...I'm okay," he said. "I think."

Then the light found Hardlee and finally Aza, who looked out from around Hardlee's shoulder.

"Dad?" she said.

"Aza?" he asked back. "Is that you? What in the hell?"

He rushed down the aisle as she sprang up and ran into his arms, crying uncontrollably.

"Aza! Baby," he yelled, holding her tight. "What in the world are you doing in here?"

Hardlee heard the sound of glass breaking, as the Sheriff spun around with his gun pointed in that direction.

"Stay here," he said, pointing at her. "Don't move."

He walked back to the end of the aisle and shined his light around the room.

"Shit."

That couldn't be good, Hardlee thought, before he walked over to Aza and JayBird at the end of the row. There was a blood stain on the floor where Old Man Nelson had been shot and was bleeding. His shotgun was still on the floor. The Sheriff was shining a light on a broken window on the back wall, the same window the three of them had used to get inside. He stuck his head outside to get a better look around.

The Sheriff turned around and shined his light on the three of them again.

"I'm guessing you have a good explanation for this, young lady," he said.

"Ummm, you did tell me to go out and make some new friends today," she said and offered a weak smile.

"Uh, huh," he answered, as he ushered the three of them back across the floor towards the front of the store. "Let's get the three of you out of here, and then we can move on to introductions. Close your eyes and I'll lead you out the front. I think you three have seen enough for one day."

Hardlee closed his eyes and felt JayBird's hand on his shoulder as the Sheriff lead them into the front of the store, around the back and out the front door.

SHANTY RED

When he finally opened his eyes, there were at least fifty people surrounding them and staring back at them. JayBird leaned into him.

“Told you it’d be cool.”

13

BROS BEFORE PROSE

“What part of cover the back did you not understand?” Sheriff Thunder asked, barely able to control his mounting anger.

Hardlee watched the sheriff while standing at the back doors of a nearby ambulance. He was getting a quick examination after exiting the store / crime scene. JayBird was next to him getting his blood pressure taken. He watched the Sheriff growing more and more angry with one of his deputies as they argued off to the side.

“I was there,” the deputy replied. “But there was nothing going on, so I figured what was the sense of staying.”

“What was the sense?” the sheriff asked, his arms raised into the air. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe to keep the suspect from escaping!” He was all out shouting by the end of that statement and must have realized it. He looked around at the first responders and crowd who were intently watching them.

“We’ll finish this conversation back on station later,” the sheriff said. “Right now, we need some dogs down here. Pronto.”

“On it, sir,” the deputy said and took off past the Sheriff’s SUV and into the crowd.

Hardlee looked back into the SUV at Aza, who was sitting in the front passenger seat. She followed the deputy as he passed too, but then she looked back and stopped at Hardlee. They exchanged a long stare and she mouthed the word “Sorry” to him. Hardlee smiled back at her and shrugged his

shoulders. She returned the smile and stuck her tongue out at him. He chuckled. She was easily the best thing to drop into his life in the last six months, even if she did almost get him blown away by some crazy old guy with a shotgun. Maybe getting stuck in that backwoods matinee wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

"I think I bruised my spleen," JayBird said, nudging Hardlee in the side with his elbow. "Can you do that?"

Hardlee paused, still staring at Aza, before he finally turned his attention to his cousin. "What?"

"Can you bruise your spleen?" JayBird repeated the question and eagerly waited for an answer.

"How would I know," Hardlee answered. "I guess."

JayBird grabbed Hardlee's hand and pulled it towards his side.

"Feel it."

Hardlee yanked his hand away.

"Get out of here," he snapped. "I'm not touching your spleen."

An ambulance worker came up next to JayBird. It was a young girl, probably in her twenties. She had long blond hair and a really nice smile.

"Hey, JayBird," she said. "I heard you took a fall in there when you tried to save your friends. Maybe we better check you out for a concussion."

"He didn't take a fall," Hardlee corrected her.

"How do you know if I fell or not?" JayBird turned to his friend and squinted both eyes, before returning to the lovely young medical worker. "It all happened so fast," he added. "I think maybe I did."

"Ok," she laughed. "Let's just make sure. Follow my finger with just your eyes."

"Yes, ma'am," JayBird said. "And then I'll tell you the whole story about how it happened."

JayBird was more interested in his pending courtship than anything else happening around them. Hardlee watched as a couple trucks with cages in the back pulled into the scene. The dogs in the back went crazy as soon as the trucks stopped, and the men exited their vehicles and tried to calm them down.

“Not yet, Beau,” the one man yelled towards the cage. “Settle down, now, boy.”

Hardlee looked across the street next to the pet shop. Someone was standing near the alley looking directly at him. The person was partially inside the alley, so Hardlee didn’t have a clear view of them, but he could tell the guy was focusing on him. He looked kind of familiar, like he’d seen him before. He just couldn’t place it.

The man waved at Hardlee, like he wanted him to walk over to him. Hardlee looked around. The Sheriff was standing with a bunch of other men, and they were all looking down at a map sprawled out in front of them on the hood of a car. One of the deputies was standing guard at the front of the store. Hardlee guessed the other deputy was around back, really around back that time. He glanced over at JayBird, who was still being tended to by the female paramedic.

“So, I just knew I had to take evasive action if I wanted to save my friends,” JayBird said, following it up with a big shit-eating grin. “It’s just who I am.”

Oh, brother. Hardlee hopped off the back of the ambulance and walked to the edge of another vehicle parked there. The mysterious man was still standing at the corner. Hardlee could see a little more of him from that angle. He was a large man, not so much fat, just wide, wearing a long coat and a big wide brimmed hat, like something he’d see in a comic book. The man was still motioning for Hardlee to join him near the alley.

Tentatively, Hardlee walked towards him. Hardlee glanced back to see JayBird was still busy courting the future Mrs. JayBird, and the Sheriff was still busy looking at maps. When he turned back around, he was startled that the mystery man had taken several steps towards him and was standing directly in front of him then.

“Whoa,” Hardlee said. The man smelled like he’d been out in the woods for a few days, or weeks, or months, not smelly, but like pine, and sap, and cut grass.

“Sorry, Hardlee,” the man said with a warm, wide smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“S’okay,” Hardlee replied. “Just wasn’t expecting that. Hey! How’d you know my name?”

The man just grinned.

“Oh,” he said. “Everybody knows your name, Hardlee. You and your friends are the talk of the town.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Hardlee said. He glanced over at the Sheriff’s SUV, but Aza was nowhere in sight. He quickly looked back to the man, not giving him a second chance at any unexpected movements.

“My, my, what a mess,” the man said, looking across the street at the crime scene tape and store. “Looks like it got pretty scary in there.”

“We did ok,” Hardlee answered. “What did you say your name was again?”

The man chuckled and looked over his shoulder at the alley behind him, like the answer to the question was somewhere in there.

“Scratch,” he finally said. “Call me, Mister Scratch.”

Scratch held his hand out, waiting for Hardlee to take it.

He looked down at the man’s offered hand. The nails were a little too long but seemed oddly manicured, coming to a bit of a point at the center of the nail. There was dirt and grime embedded under each of them. He hesitantly returned the man’s gesture, not wanting to seem rude.

Scratch grabbed Hardlee’s hand firmly, pulling him a few inches closer as he did. Hardlee could smell moss and dirt on his breath.

“Nice to meet you,” Hardlee said as politely as the funk surrounding the guy allowed.

“Do you want to see something really neat-0?” Scratch asked, gently pulling at Hardlee’s hand, leading him towards the alley behind them.

Neat-0? Who the hell says that anymore, Hardlee thought, as he felt the man slowly leading him away. The smells emitted from the guy soaked into Hardlee through his nose, his mouth, even his eyes. He had a hard time concentrating on what was happening around him.

Scratch pulled him in closer. He felt the man’s other hand wrap around his shoulder and stop on the nape of his neck as they walked towards the shadowed alleyway. Hardlee blinked but couldn’t seem to get his eyes clear. His stomach churned. The hair on his arms tingled. It didn’t even feel like his feet were touching the ground anymore, more like he was gliding along the air. It felt...comfortable, like there was no place he’d rather be.

“You’ll love it,” Scratch said. “Trust me.”

The opening to the alley grew closer. It was dark inside, and he couldn't see more than a couple feet into it. There was a garbage dumpster to one side with half the lid propped open with a stick. Even with all the other smells bombarding his senses, Hardlee winced at the smell of old rotten food coming from the container.

"Maybe I should just..." he weakly protested.

"Shhhhh," Scratch whispered. "I've got you now."

The shadows felt cool, washing over his skin, like water splashing his face, shocking but not unpleasant. He felt the grip on the back of his neck tighten as they crossed into the void. Hardlee heard Scratch's stomach growl next to him. He knew he should be afraid, but all he could feel was calm...safe.

"Hardlee," someone yelled his name from behind. At first, it sounded far away.

"Hardlee!" The voice repeated, getting closer to him.

"Ow," he said, feeling a prick along the back of his hand.

Someone grabbed him by his other arm and yanked him backwards. The force jolted him back to his senses. He felt his feet on the ground again, the chill of the alley, and the rotten smells coming from the dumpster.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Aza asked with a concerned look on her face.

"Huh," Hardlee answered. "I...I don't know."

"It looked like you were in a trance or something," she said. "You were walking straight into the alley. Are you sure you're alright?"

Hardlee took a moment to compose himself and then looked around. There was no one there but him and Aza.

"Where'd the guy go?" he asked.

"What guy?"

Hardlee looked around again, trying to see into the alley.

"The guy who was walking with me," Hardlee said. "Stringy hair, wearing a long coat and a big hat."

"I didn't see anyone like that," she answered. "I saw you walk off from the ambulance, so I got out to check on you. Next thing I saw was you walking into the alley like you were in a daze."

"Mister Scratch," Hardlee said, still trying to see into the shadows.

"Who?" Aza asked.

"He said that was his name," Hardlee answered. "Mister Scratch. Do you know anyone around here named that?"

"Ummm, let's see, Mr. Bitey, Dr. Punch-you-in-the-eye, Mrs. Tickle," she said, counting on her fingers as she went. "Nope. No, Mister Scratch. Are you sure you didn't hit your head in there?"

"Very funny," he said. "I'm serious. There was some guy just here. He wanted to show me something in the alley."

"You were about to go into a dark alley with some stranger?" she asked with both eyebrows raised. "What's next? Jumping in a white van to pet someone's dog and get free candy?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "It does sound weird to say it now. But I wasn't worried when it was happening. Wow."

Aza reached out for his hand.

"Well, how about just don't do that anymore?" she asked. "I just made a new best friend. I don't need to lose him in the same day."

Aza met Hardlee's eyes and gave him a quick smile. Whatever chill remained from the alley washed away with the rush of warmth that swept over him. He reached for her hand.

"Hey," she said, looking down. "You're bleeding."

Hardlee looked at the back of his hand and saw the line of blood trailing down his skin. It wasn't deep and there's wasn't much blood. He wiped his hand on the back of his pants.

"Huh," he said. "I wonder how that happened."

He took Aza's hand and she led him the rest of the way back out into the street. He paused long enough to give a final glance into the dark recesses of the alley before he shrugged and continued walking.

Aza pointed to the window of the pet store as they passed.

“Look,” she said. “It kind of reminds me of JayBird.”

Hardlee watched the puppy excitedly chasing its own tail in the display glass. He had to chuckle. She was right. It did remind him of his cousin. Next to the puppy was a glass aquarium. Inside it was a large brown and black spider crawling around on an ornamental stone drilled out with large holes. The spider had spun an intricate web from the corner of the rounded rock to the edge of the glass case. Hardlee watched as the creature worked on its web.

“I’ll stick with puppies,” Aza said as she pulled Hardlee away from the window.

In the distance, Hardlee heard the dogs barking again. They must have caught the scent of something he thought.

“Come on, before my dad realizes I’m not still in the car and freaks out again.”

Hardlee turned and followed his new friend.

“Right behind you.”

SMELLS LIKE SPIRITED TEENS

“Let’s go,” Rowland yelled from the front of the pack. “They got something! We need to stay on it!”

They’d been pushing into the woods for nearly an hour at that point. There was no way Rowland was letting Frank Nelson get away from him. It was bad enough he got out of town. If he hurt anyone else, it would be on Rowland’s hands. Even if the old man bled out somewhere in the woods, he’d feel responsible for it. He wasn’t allowing either of those outcomes to happen. He was still angry at himself for what happened in the backroom of the store. He should have been more aggressive. He should have followed him straight into the back and not hesitated, but closed doors were never a cop’s friend. If he went storming back there and took a hit center mass from Nelson on the way through, he wouldn’t have been able to keep that crazy sonofabitch from harming Aza. Rowland learned a long time ago to not second guess every decision he made on the job.

One of the search dogs darted off to the right, practically pulling its handler down over a small hill.

“Sheriff,” the man yelled, struggling to keep his canine under control. “Bessie’s hot! She’s got something!”

Getting the scent was easy enough from the bloody ripped sleeve left behind at the store. Rowland knew he hit him squarely in the shoulder. Not typically a fatal shot, but if he ended up in the woods all night, he could definitely die out there. The dogs took off strong out of town, but after a while, they seemed

confused and lost the trail at times. It looked like something changed.

“Down here,” someone yelled from the bottom of the hill.

Rowland navigated down the steep embankment, side-stepping branches and loose rock. At the bottom of the hill, he found himself in the open, standing next to the rushing water of the canal fed by the Potomac River, which led into the Paw Paw Tunnel downstream. He looked up at the sky. The sun was getting low. It would be dark soon. They needed to work fast.

Rowland approached a group of men looking down at the water. Along the rocks was the rest of the bloody shirt Nelson was wearing back in town.

“Looks like we’re going in the right direction,” one of the men said.

“Do you think he’d try to cross the water and cover his scent,” another man asked.

Rowland looked down at the rushing waters. All of the rain lately had kept the waters running high.

“I doubt it,” Rowland answered. “Water’s running pretty strong. I can’t see him chancing it. Let Bessie get a fresh scent here.”

One of the men handling the dogs brought her over to the discarded shirt. The dog buried its nose into the bloody garment and pushed it around on the rocks for several moments before lifting its head up into the air. The canine paused for a moment and then took off down towards the tunnel, pulling with all she had.

“She’s definitely back on the trail,” the man said, struggling with the leash.

The group of men walked along the bank for what seemed like forever. Rowland watched old Bessie work her magic, sniffing random stones, the occasional branch, and up into the air. They rounded a bend, and Rowland saw the entrance to the tunnel appear before them.

He’d only been there twice prior to that night, and each of those times it was in the daylight. Once, the mayor brought him there when he was still applying for the open sheriff position, and he wanted to show Rowland the engineering marvel that it was. The other time, Rowland had brought Aza down on a Sunday afternoon for her to get a look at it. It held her interest for about ten minutes before she wanted to go back to town.

From what he learned since moving there, the canal was built in the mid-1800's to help bypass the Paw Paw Bends, a long stretch of river with five horseshoe-shaped bends that made navigation a nightmare. It was pretty impressive to look at. The canal ran straight into the side of the rock for boats to travel through, but there was also a walkway which ran the course of the passage to one side.

Rowland walked up to the man handling the tracking dog, who had stopped about twenty feet shy of the tunnel entrance.

"What's wrong?" Rowland asked.

The dog was whimpering at the man's feet.

"I can't say I know, Sheriff," the man said, bending down and petting the side of the dog's head. "She came up to here like she was on fire, and then she just stopped. I can't get her to go no farther. It's like she's spooked."

Rowland looked down the dog, as she whined and rubbed her face against her owner's leg. Instead of sniffing, the dog snorted, like she was trying to expel a foul smell that got stuck inside her nose. He looked into the dark oval abyss at the front of the canal.

"I need some men to go with me into the tunnel," Rowland said, looking back at the group of volunteers who'd been with him since they left town. A few of them stepped forward.

"Good," Rowland said. He motioned for the man handling the dog next to him. "Keep the dogs here. We don't need them to pull one of you into the water. Whoever's with me, let's go."

Pulling a small flash light from his pocket, he clicked the light on and walked towards the front of the canal.

"If you don't have a flashlight," he said. "Make sure you stay next to somebody who does. I don't have to tell you how dark it is in there."

During his tour with the mayor that day, they walked about half way into the tunnel while it was broad daylight outside, and he couldn't see ten feet in front of him without a light. At this time of night, he doubted they'd make it 50 feet in without a flash light.

"Stay close," Rowland instructed, stepping along the planks leading to the walkway along the side of the canal.

He shined his light down over the edge to the rushing waters below him. The tunnel amplified the sound of the current and he had to raise his voice to speak.

“Stay sharp!”

Even with the number of locals and tourists who visited the place, there were still plenty of cobwebs to combat. He extended his free arm straight out in front of him to come into contact with the webs before his face did. It was noticeably colder inside the tunnel, and the damp rocks smelled of soggy mold. A wooden hand rail had been constructed separating the walkway from the canal below, which probably saved countless drunks and stupid kids from falling victim to the freezing waters below.

They were about one hundred feet into the tunnel.

“Everybody with me,” he asked.

“Right behind you, Sheriff,” someone answered.

Shining his light along the circular brick walls of the corridor, Rowland observed graffiti from the last dozen decades, the random names, peace symbols, hate symbols, and political statements. Every so often, they passed the “weep holes” constructed into the passage, small opening to help with moisture in the tunnel. As it so often happens, over the years, visitors used the nooks in the bricks to leave keepsakes and mementos behind, like colored rocks, or small figurines, or even a piece of broken jewelry. Rowland stopped suddenly along the walkway. He shined his light along the wall, stopping at a large hole in the bricks. It was much larger than the other “weep holes” they had already passed.

“Did you hear that?” Rowland asked.

“Hear what, Sheriff?” Sammie Bryner, town fire chief and bingo caller came up next to him.

Rowland placed his finger up to his mouth. “Shhhhhh.” He waited, placing his ear closing to the opening in the rock. “It almost sounds like...moaning.”

Rowland waited for the sound to repeat itself, but all he heard was the echo of the water running below him and the drip of the water falling from the ceiling above.

“Hey, Sheriff?” Someone called out from behind him. “I think we got something back here.”

Rowland turned around on the path and approached two men standing together. One of them was holding a flashlight and pointing it at the ground. Rowland saw something near the wall and leaned down to look at it.

“It’s a wallet,” Rowland said, picking it up and turning it over in his hand. He stood up and opened the wallet to find an ID in a clear plastic sleeve. He read the name on it.

“Richard Jenkins,” he said aloud.

“Our Ricky?” One of the men behind him asked. “The same one we’ve been looking for?”

“Looks like it,” Rowland answered. Losing your wallet in a place like this made sense. What he couldn’t understand was why would the guy who beat his wife practically to death the other night, and the guy who just shot someone in cold blood in town end up in the same tunnel. Something wasn’t adding up. He had a feeling he was missing something, something big.

“What do you make of that, Sheriff?”

“I don’t know,” Rowland answered. “But let’s finish clearing the tunnel and then get the hell out of here. We don’t have enough resources to keep looking. We’ll pick up fresh in the morning.”

JAY & SILENT BIRD

Even seeing it coming, the blow knocked JayBird completely off his feet. He fell backwards and landed hard against an old tire in the yard. Using it like a journeyman's trampoline, the boy bounced off the rubber ring and then rolled across the ground. He only stayed motionless for a moment before he was grabbed up by the back of his pants and he was soaring again, like a flightless, featherless, mockery of his own namesake.

All Hardlee could do was stand in stunned silence, watching his cousin get thrown around the backyard by his uncle.

"One day!" JayBird's dad yelled as he shook his son by the arm. "The boy has been here one day, and you got him involved in a dang-gummed murder!"

JayBird tried to answer him. "Well, technically he was dead before we got there."

And with that, he was air-born again.

"And he's still being a smartass about it," Mr. Harker snarled. "You got no common sense, boy!"

Hardlee had been disciplined before. There were times his mom had grounded him, taken electronics away from him, even the occasional smack to the rear. His dad, for all his other faults, didn't believe in putting his hands on him, like ever. He did his share of yelling and screaming at times, but corporal punishment? No way! So, when he and JayBird got dropped off back at the

house by one of the town's volunteer firefighters, he wasn't expecting hugs and kisses, but he wasn't ready for front row seats for backyard wrestling either.

To JayBird's credit, he was taking it like a real champ. Hardlee had the feeling this wasn't his first time getting smacked around by his Pa. Hardlee looked over his shoulder at JayBird's mom watching nervously from the porch. Dewey, his brother, had his face hidden in his mother's dress. His grandma was sitting on an old wooden rocking chair, smoking a pipe.

"That boy ain't got the sense God gave a doorknob," Grandma Gertie chuckled while she rocked and puffed away.

"Don't you hurt that boy, Pa," Aunt Bonnie yelled out. "He didn't mean no harm by it."

"No harm," Pa Harker repeated. "No harm! He snuck into a crime scene and almost got him, his cousin, and the Sheriff's daughter shot in the head!"

"I think he was aiming more at our guts," JayBird decided to add.

The senior Harker grabbed JayBird by the collar of his shirt and dragged him across the yard and over to Hardlee before letting him go. The man spun around to face Hardlee, who felt all the blood instantly drain from his face.

"And you," he said, pointing a callous-laden slightly crooked finger into the boy's face. His eyes were filled with anger.

"Yes, sir?" was all Hardlee could think of saying.

"Give him the switch," Grandma Gertie yelled from the porch. "Good switchin' would straighten them both out."

The senior Harker looked over at the old lady, who was rocking and puffing and smoking like a runaway locomotive, waiting to see Hardlee do his best airplane impression. "This is better than cable," she yelled from the porch.

"You gotta be more careful, son," the old man said, his emotion seeming to drop from a ten to a two in an instant. "I promised your daddy we'd look out for you, not get you killed. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Hardlee repeated.

"JayBird, he ain't all there," his uncle continued. "The boy ain't got the smarts like you got. Yeah. Your daddy told us all about you."

Hardlee could honestly say in his entire lifetime, he could never recall one time where his father referred to him as anything even remotely resembling smart.

His uncle reached for his head, and Hardlee winced, waiting for him to cinch down. Instead, he just ruffled his hair a bit. "So, maybe you watch out for my JayBird here too. I know you just got here and are still settling in. What say? We got us a deal?"

What else could he really say at that point.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, then," Pa Harker finished, and gave a weak attempt at a smile. "You boys stay here in the back yard where we can keep an eye on you, at least for tonight. Ma's getting supper ready."

The elder Harper climbed up the steps to the back porch. JayBird's mom touched his shoulder as he passed. He grunted in return and headed back inside. After the screen door slammed closed, she rushed down the steps straight to JayBird. Dewey followed a couple steps behind her.

"Baby, are you ok?" She asked. "He didn't mean to hurt you none. We just worry about you."

JayBird brushed the dirt off his shirt and grinned back at his mother.

"Right as rain, ma," he answered. "Just ripped up my shirt a bit." He pointed to a tear in the seam of the sleeve.

His mother looked at it. "I'll get that sewed up like nobody's business."

"You shouldn't be bad, JayBird," Dewey said, pointing at his brother. "You're a bad bird."

JayBird smiled and reached out and pretended to grab his brother's ear. He stuck his thumb between his first two fingers, so only a nub was showing.

"Yeah, well, this bad bird has got your ear," he teased, showing Dewey his thumb tip. Dewey lunged for his brother's hand, which JayBird raised out of reach.

"No," Dewey cried. "Give it back, JayBird. That's mine!"

JayBird turned around in a circle with his hand in the air as his brother circled around him, trying to get his ear lobe back.

JayBird laughed as he turned. "Too slow, little bro. Looks like it's my ear now."

"No. No. No," Dewey shouted. "You're a bad bird. Bad bad bird."

Finally, JayBird put his hand down, allowing Dewey to snatch the imaginary body part out of his hand and reattach it to his ear. JayBird just laughed and rubbed the top of the boy's head, much like his father had done to Hardlee a few moments before.

"Love you, little bro," he said. "I'm just messing with you."

Dewey ran back to the safety of his mother's side. She placed her hand on his check and looked down at him.

"My special little Dewdrop," she said. "Come inside with momma."

She looked over at Hardlee. "We got a roast tonight special for Hardlee coming. You like roast, sweetie?"

"I love it," Hardlee said. "You didn't have to do that."

"Our pleasure," she said with a warm smile.

She leaned over and gave JayBird a kiss on the forehead, before turning and giving Hardlee one too. It was hard not to immediately like this woman.

"JayBird, go in and change your shirt real quick, so that tear doesn't get no bigger," she said, as she moved to the porch.

"Ok," JayBird said, and in a flash, he ran up the stairs to the porch. "Be right back, Hardlee."

"Ain't nobody get a good switchin'?" Gram Gertie yelled from her seat on the porch. "I was aiming to see a switchin'!"

"Not today, momma," JayBird's mom said as she passed.

"Aw, well, Hell," Gram Gertie said, blowing a ring of smoke from her pipe. "No wonder we got a whole generation of sissies."

She struggled up from her rocker and followed the others back into the house.

And, suddenly, Hardlee realized he was by himself. He turned around and looked at the yard, staring into the woods behind the house. He felt a breeze kick up and blow across his face. He took in a long breath and closed his eyes.

“Hardlee.”

He opened his eyes and looked around, expecting to see JayBird standing there in a new shirt. Instead, he was still alone.

“Hardlee.”

It was coming from the woods. Someone was calling his name. He took a couple steps across the yard, closer to the wood line and stopped again.

“Hardlee. I’m waiting.”

“Who’s there?” he asked.

“It’s me, Mister Scratch,” the voice said. “Do you still have it?”

“Have what?” Hardlee asked as he stepped across the yard.

“Have what?” He repeated, stepping cautiously into the woods.

He was on the same path him and JayBird rode their bikes on earlier. The woods looked different in the dark, more sinister. Something was glowing in the distance up ahead. He followed the path deeper into the wood, following the light. He could see the dull red glow down over the hill, the place where JayBird showed him next to the entrance to the old mines. The lamp shanty he called it. The glow was coming from inside of it. Something walked past the light, its shadow reaching out towards him.

“Who’s there? What do I have?”

He waited for a response, but heard only silence.

“Hello?”

He turned to head back towards the house.

“The coin,” the voice whispered.

“JayBird,” Hardlee laughed. “Quit screwing around.”

“It’s me,” the voice said. “Your buddy. Mister Scratch.”

Hardlee froze in place, watching the glow coming from the old shanty below him. Something moved around inside, scratching at the cement floor as it went. He shoved his hand in his pocket and felt his dad’s pocketknife first and then the coin he found on the ground.

“How’d you find me?” He asked.

“We are connected,” Scratch replied. “You and I. Like brothers. Blood brothers.”

Hardlee looked at the mark on the back of his hand.

“I still want to show you something,” Scratch softly called to him. “I can show you down here.”

“I don’t think so,” Hardlee said and stepped back. “I need to get back.”

“It’ll only take a minute,” Scratch said. “I have more coins.”

Hardlee spun around in a circle. The voice was coming from all around him then, not just from the glow. The leaves rustled and fluttered around his legs. He watched them funnel in the wind and raise up towards the sky. He felt like he could fly away with them. He just needed to let go.

“Come to me, Hardlee,” Mister Scratch called out again.

He looked back at the lamp shanty, the light glowing, pulsing from within. A figure, the same figure he met back in town, raised up from the ground, floating in the air, arms raised to each side. Something was drawing him towards it, pulling at him.

“I don’t want to,” Hardlee said, his voice trembling.

“You don’t have a choice,” Scratch hissed.

A bright light crashed through the woods next to him, coming straight at him. He could see it getting closer, breaking through the limbs and branches. He couldn’t move, couldn’t turn, he could only wait for it to arrive. The light hurt his eyes as it rushed up next him.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” JayBird yelled in his ear.

Hardlee felt the control of his muscles return. He turned towards his cousin, who had a headlamp strapped to the front of his bike.

“What the shit you doing out here?” JayBird asked.

“I thought I heard something,” Hardlee said, looking back towards the old lamp shanty. There was no trace of the light or of Mister Scratch.

“Well, I don’t feel much like getting my hide tanned a second time tonight,” JayBird said. “So, we best get back to the house before Ma calls out for dinner. Come on!”

SHANTY RED

“Yeah. Yeah,” Hardlee said, following his cousin back down the trail, giving a last look behind him. “I’m coming.”

HAPPY HOUR

“Last call!” the girl announced from behind the bar.

Curtis looked down at his watch, surprised at how fast the night slipped by again. He finished up the last of his draft beer and motioned for another one before he officially called it a night. He knew he still had to drive home and didn’t need to get caught by the police. They seemed to have their hands full with the shooting that happened in town at the store earlier, but it would be his luck, he’d still get caught.

It was a typical thin crowd at the Legion. No bands. No karaoke. No trivia. Just beer and conversations made up of some gossip, some truth, and lots of exaggerations. That’s what he liked about the place. Ever since he came home from deployment, he found comfort in the quiet there. His days of loud music, fast cars, and chasing women were behind him.

“Here you go, Curtis,” Shelly said, sliding a fresh draft over to him. “You alright to drive?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he responded. A handful of beers mixed in with a steak hoagie and fries over the last couple hours, and he figured the math added up. “You’re always looking out for me, Shelly.”

“I gotta look out for my regulars,” she said with a smile.

Curtis watched her move to the other end of the bar and pour someone else a drink. Shelly was in her thirties, pretty, long dirty blond hair, with a bright smile and attractive figure. He’d thought about asking her out on more than

one occasion, but if she turned him down, it would feel awkward coming back there to drink, and there wasn't exactly a lot of options in town. She turned back towards the bar and opened a bottle using a metal hook attached to the counter.

"Yeah. I'd tap that." A man came up and sat next to Curtis, leaning in close with the smell of hard liquor pouring off him.

Curtis turned toward the man, who hadn't been there a minute ago. The guy was a total mess and drunk off his ass. His clothes were disheveled and dirty, his hair matted and pulled down over his face, and there was something about his eyes. Curtis couldn't help but focus on them. They were beat red and looked like he just went ten rounds and lost every single one. The left eye was almost swollen shut. It was painful just to look at him. The guy had been seated in the far corner of the room earlier. He didn't know who he was, which wasn't exactly common around those parts.

"Can I help you, pal?" Curtis asked.

"Yeah," the man slurred. "Tell the girl with the big titties down there I need another beer."

"They already had last call," Curtis replied. He immediately didn't like the guy. "Looks like you're shit out of luck."

The man looked at the full beer in front of Curtis, and then back down the bar towards Shelly.

"Yeah. Ok," he said. "Hey! Bar bitch! Get me another beer, sweet ass!"

Curtis put one foot down from the stool to brace himself and turned towards the drunk asshole beside him. He was about to say something when Shelly appeared across the bar.

"I'm sorry, mister," she said with a smile. "I think you've had enough already. How about you let the bar bitch get you a ride home instead?"

"How about you march that cute little ass back over to the drafts and pour me one," he said, returning Shelly's smile with his own mocking slobbery attempt at one. He pushed his empty glass across the bar and it banged into the rail on her side.

"What part of being cut off don't you understand?" Curtis asked. He could feel his temperature rising.

Shelly leaned up on the counter and smiled even bigger.

“Listen, fellas,” she said. “I love two guys fighting over me as much as the next girl, but we gotta close down sometime. I think we all had enough good time for one night.”

She reached across the bar and patted the man on the arm before turning to get back to her closing routine. The man reached across and grabbed her by the wrist. Curtis watched Shelly’s face turn from light-hearted fun to actual concern.

“Or you can just get me another beer, bitch!” He snapped.

Curtis looked down at the man’s arm. There was a large wound on the back of his wrist, as red as the man’s eyes. It looked like an untreated cut, the skin bubbling around it, probably infected. He grabbed the guy by the shoulder and pushed him away from the bar. Shelly pulled her hand free from his grip.

“Back off!” Curtis yelled.

“Hey! Hey!” Shelly said at the same time. “That’s it. You’re out. Now.”

The man stumbled back a few steps before he regained his footing. “Or what?” he mumbled.

“Or I call the Sheriff and you spend the night in a jail cell,” she said. “Judging from your condition, that’s going to make for a long night.”

The man paused where he stood, swaying back and forth from one foot to the other, like he was contemplating his options. Finally, he turned and headed for the door.

“Fuck the both of you,” he said, giving the middle finger as he walked out the door.

Curtis watched him go, making sure the door shut behind him, before he turned back to Shelly. She seemed a little shaken by someone putting their hands on her.

“I love my job,” she said with a weak giggle.

“Maybe you just need to find the right man?” Curtis said, almost accidentally. But there it was. Out there and open for rejection.

“Why? Are you asking me out, Curtis Maynard White?” The concern faded from her face, replaced with mild amusement and a hint of curiosity.

“I suppose I am,” he said, looking firmly down at the floor.

There was an awkward silence and hesitation in the air. Curtis supposed they were both considering the life choices presented to them that night. If she turned him down, he may have to go sober.

“Well,” she finally said. “It’s about time.”

Curtis blew out a very audible sigh of relief and chuckled, still looking down at the floor. “I really didn’t want to have to find another bar,” he said, finally looking at up her face.

They both shared a laugh at that.

“I get done at eight tomorrow night,” she said. “Maybe we could catch a movie?”

“Yeah, sure,” he answered. “There’s some new monster movie out I wanted to check out.”

She smiled and reached across the bar to touch his hand. “Well, as much as any girl loves a gore fest on their first date, maybe we’ll start with something a little less...messy?”

“I suppose you’re right. Lady’s choice,” he said with a smile, getting up from his bar stool.

“Now you’re getting it,” she said, turning to finish wiping down the counter. “Tomorrow night. Eight o’clock.”

“Got it,” he said at the door. “Looking forward to it.”

Curtis walked out into the parking lot with a little extra spring to his step and a smile he couldn’t hide if he tried.

Not too bad, old son, Curtis thought to himself as he made his way across the lot to his truck. He fumbled for the keys in his jeans pocket.

“Not so tough now, are you, asshole?”

The voice came from behind him, and Curtis immediately cursed himself for not paying more attention. He should have expected it. He spun around to face the drunk from inside the bar.

“Look, pal,” he said. “I don’t want no trouble. I just didn’t want you grabbing the lady. You and me? We got no problem.”

Curtis felt the knife puncture the side of his stomach. It felt weird at first, like a quick sharp jab, but then he felt the blade twist around inside him, and the pain brought him to his knees.

“Yeah, well, I got a problem with you,” the drunk growled, his eyes even more red than they were inside. “And this is how I deal with my problems.”

He pulled the knife out of Curtis’ gut, and he felt the warm ooze of blood flood down his belly and soak into his shirt. Instinctively, he grabbed for his stomach, looking down and seeing his hand covered in crimson. The guy was rearing back for another shot with the knife when Curtis pushed himself back up and tackled him instead.

They both fell to the ground, still wrestling with each other for control. Curtis tried to grab the man’s hand, the one with the knife, but his own hand was slippery because of the blood. Their faces were within inches of each other, and he could smell the days of alcohol rolling off the man.

Suddenly, the man pivoted his weight, and Curtis found himself with his back to the ground. The man landed punch after punch to Curtis’ head and face. He tried to block as many as he could, but the man was frantic with the blows. Dizzy from the shots to the head and the loss of blood, he stared up at the guy, who was looking for something on the ground.

“Where the fuck’s my knife?” he yelled, frantically searching around them.

Curtis turned his head to the side and saw the blade in the gravel near his left arm. He wrapped his hand around the handle and thrust the blade towards the man. Instead of the gut shot Curtis intended, the blade imbedded deep into the man’s neck, all the way to the hilt.

The man grabbed for the knife, giving Curtis the chance to push his way free. He crawled across the gravel lot, putting distance between the two of them. He heard the man choking and gurgling, then falling to the ground. Using his own truck tire for balance, Curtis pulled himself up to his feet. He looked down at the wound to his stomach, blood still rushing out. He opened the truck door and grabbed an old work shirt off the seat, balling it up and holding it against his side.

He looked back at the man, who was still on the ground but no longer moving. A pool of blood formed around his head.

“Fuck you,” Curtis shouted. “Drunk asshole!”

Curtis stumbled over to him and lightly kicked him in the side.

“Hey!”

He looked down at the man’s face and then stumbled backwards towards his truck.

“I gotta...gotta call an ambulance,” he said, reaching into his pocket for his phone.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he spun around. He thought maybe the drunk found a second wind, or maybe Shelly heard to commotion and came outside to see what happened. What he didn’t expect to be there was a petite Asian lady dressed in a red kimono with a gold dragon that wrapped its way all around her body. Her hair was black and straight down both sides of her face. She had the greenest eyes he had ever seen with small red lips, puckered together in a slight smile. She just stood there, motionless, waiting.

“It...it was an accident,” Curtis said, stumbling for his words. “He came at me with a knife. I didn’t have a choice. It was self-defense.”

She turned to look at the man dead on the ground next to them. She moved next to him and bent down, running her fingers down his bloody cheek. She stood up and wiped her fingers clean on Curtis’ shirt.

“He’s of no use to anyone, now,” she said. “But you, you showed great courage.”

“I don’t know about courage,” he said. “I didn’t want to do that.”

She stepped in closer, and he smelled the lilac on her skin. She touched his arm. It felt warm, soothing. He could feel his heart beat faster in his chest, his breathing quickened. His panic melted away, and he knew somehow, he would be alright.

Her hand slowly moved from his arm to his stomach and then over his hand covering his wound. He looked down at their hands. His blood on hers. She took her hand away and moved it to her mouth, gently tasting the blood.

“You are very strong, indeed,” she said. “Come with me. I’ll take all your pain away.”

She walked over to the passenger side of his truck and got inside, motioning for him to join her. Curtis knew something wasn’t right. He just killed a man. He needed to call someone. An ambulance. The police. His lawyer. But all he wanted to do right then was to be next to the mysterious women sitting in his

truck. He pulled himself up into the driver's side of the vehicle and shut the door.

Starting the truck, he looked over at her.

"I don't even know your name," he said.

"You can call me Lady," she said warmly, smiling back at him. "Lady Whispers."

HARDLEE KNEW YA

It felt like he was on a sheet of ice. Hardlee twisted one way and then the other, grabbing for his blanket, only to come up empty. Something dug into his side, like he was laying on a pile of rocks, and he just couldn't adjust around them. It was, by far, the most uncomfortable bed he'd ever slept on. He felt a cold breeze blow across him and he shivered uncontrollably. Something landed on his face, covering his nose and mouth, and his eyes snapped open.

At first, he was confused. He was looking up into the star filled sky, which seemed pleasant enough until his thoughts formed around the fact of him actually being outside. He sat up from the ground, watching the large maple leaf fall away from his face. He confirmed it. He was definitely outside and was laying on a concrete floor. He could feel the cold stone pressed against the palm of each hand. It was dark out and he had trouble getting his bearings.

"JayBird," he called out. "This isn't funny! Why would you drag me outside? It's freezing out here, you dickhead!"

He waited for a reply from his cousin and heard only silence. He probably went back inside the house and was sound asleep in his own bed.

Hardlee looked around. He was in a room, just not the one he expected. He could make out walls and windows, but there definitely wasn't a roof. A giant red moon beamed down at him from above, a blood moon he heard his dad call them before. It looked way too close to be real, almost like something out of a cartoon. At first, he thought he must have fallen asleep on the porch, or maybe he got up to use the bathroom and took a wrong turn back to his room,

but this was different. It felt wrong. He was somewhere he shouldn't be.

An animal, probably a coyote, howled somewhere in the distance. Hardlee scrambled to his feet. His legs were wobbly and his head felt full of fog. He looked down and noticed he wasn't wearing any shoes. His feet were muddy. There were leaves and twigs caked between his toes, like he'd been walking through the woods for some distance. He stepped closer to one of the walls and noticed there was some writing on it. It was hard to make out in the dark but as he got closer, he realized he knew the symbol. It was the same symbol he noticed there the last time, when JayBird first showed it to him. Hardlee spun around and realized – he was back inside the old lamp shanty in the woods behind the Harker's house!

"How the hell did I get out here?" he asked, looking around. "This isn't real. It's a dream. It has to be."

He looked down and realized he was only wearing a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt, the same clothes he changed into before he went to bed. He must have sleepwalked all the way out there. It was the only explanation he could come up with. The problem with that was he'd never sleepwalked before in his life. He looked around, trying to remember everything he could from when JayBird brought him out there earlier. Of course, that was in the daylight, which made it a lot easier and a helluva lot less creepy.

He moved across the floor, watching each step because of all the trash and debris scattered everywhere. There was something drawn on the wall near him and he inched closer to it. It was a rough drawing of the same three skeletons on the coin he found earlier, doing their best imitation of the See No, Hear No, Speak No monkeys. His grandma used to have a painted statue of them on her bookshelf when him and his mom and dad would visit her. She'd let him play with it and then make monkey sounds and dance around the kitchen. Hardlee always thought it was the funniest thing. It didn't seem too funny then.

He looked below the skeletons, something he didn't notice the last time he saw the drawing. There were stick figures holding hands under it. One was wearing a tie, another wore a dress, and a smaller one in between them. The two larger figures had "X's" carved over them, leaving only the smaller one unscathed. Next to that, someone had carved initials – "H.O. plus M.S. – friends forever".

H.O. – Hardlee Owens. That was supposed to be him, he'd guessed. But if that was him, who the heck was M.S. He immediately thought of Aza, kind of hoping to make it fit somehow, but he couldn't imagine her all the way out there, let alone writing their names on the wall.

Another coyote howled somewhere in the night. That one seemed a lot closer than the first one, or maybe it was the same one moving towards him. He didn't like that idea. Either way, Hardlee decided it was time to get out of there. He moved towards the opening for the door, the same one he and JayBird came through earlier. He remembered the entrance to the mine wasn't far from there, and that was somewhere he wanted to steer clear of. He could make his way back up the hill to the path and find his way back to the house from there. Outside of the terrifying fear of walking the woods at night with wild predators lurking around, it should be easy enough.

"Ouch!" He yelled, stepping on something sharp on his way to the door.

He picked up his foot and looked at the bottom of it. There was a metal bottle cap embedded into the pad of his foot. It looked like it was in there pretty deep. He pinched both sides of the cap and yanked it free, wincing from the pain. It bled a little, dripping down onto the concrete.

"Of all the rotten luck," he said. He felt stupid for not being more careful. It was bad enough he was all the way out there, let alone making it back to the house on an injured foot.

Something flashed and caught his eye. He turned to see the pentagram drawn into the wall. It was shimmering and pulsing with a warm red tone. Hardlee wasn't raised to be the most devote person on the planet. His parents never pushed any certain faith on him, and they never really even went to church except for the occasional marriage or baptism, but he was still fairly sure of certain things. There was both good and evil in the world. Luckily, the good things usually seemed to outnumber the bad things. But at times, he found himself questioning that. All that said, he was pretty certain there was something evil in those walls, something that wanted to hurt him.

"Hardlee-boy? Are you there?" The voice called to him from just outside the lamp shanty walls. "It's me. It's your friend."

At first, Hardlee was relieved, thinking he was right and it was a bad practical joke after all. But there was something in the voice, something unnatural to it.

"Who's there?" Hardlee asked. "JayBird? Is that you? Quit screwing around."

"No. No. Your...other friend," the voice answered. "The one from the alley. Don't you remember?"

"From the alley?" Hardlee asked, trying to put it together. "Wait! You!"

Mister Scratch stepped out of the shadows, walking through the entrance into the bare walls of the lamp shanty. He appeared little more than a bundle of huddled clothes as he crossed the floor, moving closer to Hardlee. He wore a wide-brimmed hat pulled low on his head, and he held a lantern out in front of him in one hand, glowing as red as the moon above them. In the other hand, he was dragging something behind him. Hardlee couldn't tell what it was, he could only hear it sliding across the concrete.

"What do you want from me?" Hardlee asked, backing away from the man as he approached.

"What I said that I wanted, Hardlee-boy," Scratch replied. "To be your special friend."

Hardlee kept backing up until he felt the wall behind him. He looked to either side of him for a window or doorway. There were none close. He was trapped there.

"I don't want to be your friend," Hardlee said as Scratch got closer and closer to him. "Find someone else, you fucking weirdo!"

A blackened hand burst from the wall next to Hardlee, grabbing him by his shoulder.

"Hey!" He screamed. "Let go! What's happening?"

Another hand broke free from the bricks on his other side, grabbing his t-shirt tight in its grasp.

"Hey! Stop it!" Hardlee shouted as Scratch kept coming towards him.

He looked down in horror as more hands exploded from the bricks, grabbing him by his ankles and wrists. He was trapped, held tight by the dark appendages against the wall, as Scratch inched his way forward, holding the lantern up near the boy's head.

"It doesn't work that way, Hardlee," Mister Scratch said. "You don't get to choose. Only I do. And I already choose you. Just accept it."

Hardlee struggled to break free, but he was held tight against the wall. The red light from the lantern was blinding him. He tried to get a look into Scratch's face, but the light pulsed faster and faster, quickening to the rapid beat of Hardlee's own heart.

“Easy, boy,” Scratch giggled. “Easy does it now. You’re no good to me dead,” he said.

Scratch hung his lantern on a metal hook on the wall. Without the light blaring in his face, Hardlee looked down and saw the body of the dead coyote Scratch was dragging behind him. He let go of the animal, which fell with a hollow thud to the ground. Hardlee stared into the lifeless eyes of the beast at his feet, transfixed by cold stare of the recently dead.

“You know, you and I are not that much different,” Scratch said, reaching into his waistband and pulling out a knife with a long, wavy blade. “Some might say we’re, oh, how do folks around here say it? That’s right! We’re like two peas in the same pod.”

“You’re a monster,” Hardlee yelled into Scratch’s face, which was nothing but a sea of darkness and shadows swirling around under his hat.

“Monster? Don’t let society define what is a monster, Hardlee,” Scratch said as he knelt on the ground and plunged the knife into the coyote’s belly. He carved a line down through the center of the animal about a foot long. Hardlee watched the heat from the dead beast escape into the cold evening air, turning into a mist like the soul visibly leaving a body. He could smell the crimson iron in the air as Scratch plunged a hand deep into the animal, pulling out a handful of organs and intestine, and letting them fall to the ground, making a sickening sound.

“You and I were thrown aside by the world, Hardlee,” Scratch continued, throwing more guts on the pile as he continued the process. “We didn’t ask for any of this. But here we are, in a world not of our making, and we have to find a way to survive. It’s natural selection, really.”

Scratch wiped his blood-covered hand against his pants leg. He returned his knife into his waistband as he stood up to face Hardlee. “Don’t you see it? That’s why we’re so perfect for each other – two lost souls in a world of despair.”

“I’m nothing like you,” Hardlee yelled as he spit into the black pit of Scratch’s face. He struggled to break free, but he was held tight.

Scratch paused and stepped back. He wiped at his face with the same bloody hand he just used to disembowel the dead coyote. All Hardlee could make out were two large dark pools of onyx that he guessed were the man’s eyes.

“Oh, boo hoo! Life dealt little Hardlee a raw deal. Poor little guy,” Scratch

mocked him before rushing in within inches of Hardlee's face. "Life's tough, child. You need to get over yourself or you'll be the one gutted on the floor!"

Scratch was so close, Hardlee could smell the dirt and mildew on his skin, but he still couldn't see any details in his face, almost as if he wore a mask. Hardlee turned away from him, but Scratch grabbed him by the chin, forcing his face back towards him.

"Maybe it's time we were properly introduced?" Scratched seethed, as he slowly grabbed the brim of his hat and removed it.

Hardlee stared in horror and disbelief as he looked back into his own face, somehow attached to Scratch's body.

"You and I, we are the same, Harldee-boy. I told you!" He laughed. "You got special blood, boy. Oh, we're gonna have such a party, you and me."

"No!" Hardley screamed back at him. "You're lying! I'm not you! I'm nothing like you."

Hardlee watched as two long knives extended down from the sleeves in Scratch's coat. There were inscriptions and symbols carved into the sides of both blades. He tried to read them, but he couldn't focus because of the fear.

"Please," Hardlee begged. "Just leave me alone. I don't want to be your friend. I don't."

"That's a shame, Hardlee-boy, because, me and you? We got business that needs tended to. Hold still now," Scratch said, jolting forward and plunging the blades directly at Hardlee's face.

"Nooo!"

Hardlee jumped up in bed and threw his hands out in front of his face. He grabbed at the air as he opened his eyes and looked around. He wasn't in the shanty anymore. He was on a small cot in the back corner of the Harper's house. He was frantic, on the verge of hyperventilating, as he sat there and tried to get his breathing under control. He looked around the room for anything out of the ordinary. No glowing pentagrams, no lanterns, no dead coyotes, and no murderous strangers dressed in rags.

"Man, what a nightmare," he said to himself.

He looked at the drape hung up in the doorway, separating him from the

rest of the house. There was a dull light shining from the gap underneath. For a minute, Hardlee hoped maybe his mom would pull back the curtain and rush in and take him in her arms, telling him everything would be alright. Maybe it had all just been a bad dream, the funeral, the courtroom, Father Ron, even JayBird and the Harkers. Maybe he just needed to close his eyes and wish it all away.

Leaning over to the window next to his bed, Hardlee pulled back the curtain to the backyard. He could see the yard, the grass, the assorted junk, and the woods behind it. He knew the window was shut, he checked the lock before he fell asleep the first time, but he could still feel whatever was out there calling to him. And if he looked hard enough, he could make out the faint amber glow of the lamp shanty somewhere deep in the heart of the woods.

Just for safety's sake, Hardlee double-checked the lock on the window to be sure it was latched before he laid his head back down. His mind was racing with thoughts and painful memories of his mom, his dad, and every other shitty thing that happened to him in the last few months. Maybe he was too far gone. Maybe he was one of the losers, the castaways. Maybe that was as good as life was getting for him, sleeping in the closet of people who only let him there because they got paid off by the church.

That's why that Scratch guy was so interested in him, back in the field and back in town, and why was he showing up in his dreams. Hardlee knew one thing for certain, he never wanted to see that guy again, but somehow, he already knew their fates were intertwined, and that scared him more than anything else.

The other thing he was certain about was the fact he wasn't falling asleep anytime soon.

GUN CONTROL TO MAJOR TOM

“But I just made friends with them,” Aza pleaded, sitting at the kitchen table while pouring the last of a carton of milk into a glass on the table.

“I know, Aza,” her father said, getting a fresh jug of milk from the fridge. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to hang out with those boys.”

He placed the milk on the table.

“They’re nice,” she said, grabbing the container and filling her glass to the top. “They didn’t mean for all that to happen. We didn’t know he had a gun.”

Her father sat down at the table. He was already dressed for work, so Aza pretty much knew a breakfast sermon was coming her way.

“I know,” he said. “But he did. And you almost got hurt because of it. I can’t chance you being in a position like that again. You have to be smarter than that, sweetie. I need you to make good choices.”

“Like moving to some Podunk back-water town and just expecting everyone to be okay with it?” She shot back, knowing it wasn’t the best choice of words, but she’d been wanting to say that for a while.

“That’s not fair,” he said. “You know why I did this.”

She could see the hurt in her father’s eyes. She felt a tinge of guilt over saying it, but shouldn’t she have some say in how her life played out.

“But I left all my friends back there,” she pushed back. “It’s like I’m an alien here.”

“I wanted us both to have a fresh start,” he said, pouring himself a bowl of cereal. “Somewhere we can breathe.”

“I could breathe just fine where we were,” she said, feeling her voice raise and the anger welling up in her chest. “This was all about you and you know it!”

Her dad sat there twirling his spoon around in his bowl of dry cereal, like he was going to find some kind of answer in the powdered flakes.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said, still staring down at the table. He looked up and met her stare. “But I need you to at least give it a try here. Could you do that? For me.”

She wasn’t expecting that. She was already lining up her next comeback, but that was off the table now. When they first moved there, she convinced her dad to let her finish her classes online to avoid the whole “new kid” stigma that late into the school year. She wouldn’t have that option this year, and it scared the hell out of her. Her dad jumped right into his new job, and was busy pretty much from the start. She’d had a lot of time to think about her new life there, and find every shortcoming possible to focus on. She knew her dad was doing the best he could, and he only wanted her to have a good life. Maybe, she could give him a little bit of a break.

“What’s in it for me?” She asked. She may agree to go easy on him, but she wasn’t about to let him know that. “I’m thinking a nose ring.”

He laughed and finally poured some milk in his bowl.

“How about a second one in the ear?” he countered.

“Cartlidge or lobe?”

“Your pick.”

“Sweet. Deal,” she said, satisfied with the tense negotiations.

She watched her dad shovel about six spoons of cereal into his mouth and then push away from the table. It appeared the family bonding time was over.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “I’ve got to get down to the Legion. Apparently, a

couple guys got into a fight outside last night, and one guy got...hurt real bad.”

“Hurt bad as in dead?” she asked. “So, that’s like two bodies in less than two days. Some great small town living here, Dad. I think we were safer in the city.”

“Yeah,” he shoveled one last dose of cereal in his mouth, dropping the spoon into the sink. “I’ve been out half the night handling disturbance calls, then this happened. I still got two fugitives on the run and a missing kid, with a trail that ends cold at that tunnel outside of town, which is like a possible maze of tunnels under that as it turns out. Whatever you do, stay away from there. Got it?”

There was a noticeable silence while he waited for his answer.

“Aza.”

“Yeah, Dad,” she finally said. “Got it! Geesh!”

“Matter of fact,” he added. “Let’s make this easy. Why don’t you just hang around the house for the next couple days until I can get a handle on things? Can you do that for me? Just two days. Then we’ll go find a mall and get that earring. What do you say?”

“I’m grounded?” she asked, a little shocked.

“Let’s not call it grounded,” he said. “Let’s say a voluntary commitment.”

“I think that sounds even worse,” she said and rolled her eyes. “I will. I promise,” she said, holding her spoon straight up in the air, like a beacon of truth.

“Azalea,” he said, just staring at her.

She knew he was extra-serious when he used her full first name.

“What?” she asked. “I promised on a breakfast spoon. It doesn’t get any more committed than that.”

“Thank you,” he said and smiled. “And stay away from that JayWalker and Barely kid.”

“JayBird and Hardlee,” she corrected. “And we only hung out that one day. It’s no big deal.”

Her dad grabbed his jacket from the hook near the door. "I'll be home as soon as I can. I promise. What do you think for dinner tonight? Pizza?"

"Sounds good," she said. "Have a good day today."

"I highly doubt it," he answered, walking out the door. "But I appreciate it anyway."

"And be careful," she added as he stepped outside.

She watched the door shut and then heard his SUV start and pull away from the house. She grabbed both her and her dad's bowls and put them in the sink before turning and heading upstairs.

"So, he didn't say I was grounded," she said to herself as she ran up the stairs. "Technically, I'm not breaking any rules."

She knew she had to find her new friends. There was way too much going on for them to just sit around. The only problem she had was she had no idea where to find for them. She just accidentally stumbled across them yesterday in town. They were probably in trouble for what happened at the store. She had to try something and town was as good as anywhere to start.

TEN YARDS FOR ROUGHING

“Keep running, Dewey,” JayBird yelled. “Go! Go! Go!”

Hardlee tried keeping up with the smaller boy, but he was surprisingly fast.

The younger Harker stopped and pivoted on one leg, changing direction and making a run for the wood line. The morning sun beamed down into the back yard, and Hardlee squinted to make out JayBird standing near the porch, ready to heave the football. All the junk scattered throughout the yard didn’t make keeping up with Dewey any easier. He definitely had home field advantage. Hardlee tried to mimic the boy’s move, but his foot slipped out from under him and he went down to the ground. His chest bounced off the grass, and he gasped for his breath.

“Here it comes, Dewey,” JayBird yelled. “Keep your eye on it!”

From the ground, Hardlee watched JayBird heave the ball into the air, soaring out of his hand in an almost perfect spiral towards his younger brother, who danced giddily near the edge of the yard.

Hardlee turned to watch Dewey attempt to make the catch. To his credit, he hung in there and took the full impact of the ball smacking him in the shoulder. He made a grab for it, but it bounced off him and then danced along the ground.

“Again! Again!” Dewey yelled, as he ran back towards his big brother.

“Bring the ball back!” JayBird yelled. “You gotta get the ball!”

Dewey stopped dead and pivoted back towards the edge of the yard to retrieve the football.

Hardlee looked up to see JayBird looming over him. He reached down to help him up.

“You okay there, cuz?” he asked.

Hardlee accepted the assistance and brushed the grass and dirt from his pants, feeling a little embarrassed he just got schooled by the young boy.

“I slipped,” he said.

“Uh, huh,” JayBird chided, as Dewey came running back to them, football tucked under the arm. JayBird grabbed Dewey from behind and lifted him off his feet, shaking him from side to side. “Old Dewey here is pretty slick, like a turd!”

Dewey tried to pull free.

“Not a turd,” he yelled, before breaking free of JayBird’s grasp and pushing him. “You’re a turd!”

Hardlee was still feeling slightly bothered by being “burned” by Dewey. He was never really a competitive person, but for some reason, it agitated him that morning.

“Okay,” Hardlee said. “My turn. Let’s see what you got.”

“You’re on,” JayBird said, picking the football up from the ground. “Dewey, you’re covering Hardlee. Stay on him real tight now. Hear?”

“Okay, bird!” Dewey answered.

The three of them lined up on the imaginary line in the yard with JayBird holding the football down on the ground. Hardlee dug his foot into the dirt to get a better jump. He could feel the sweat dripping down his face and his fingers start to tingle.

“Blue set. Roger that. On my mark,” JayBird called out and then paused before yelling. “Hike!”

Hardlee sprinted away from the line, pushing his legs as hard as he could. He felt Dewey running beside him, so he cut to the right to get some space between them.

“Go deep!” JayBird yelled to him.

Hardlee pivoted to the left and took off for the woods.

“I’m open!” he screamed back to his cousin.

He looked back to see JayBird release the ball in another near-perfect spiral, coming right towards him. The arch on the throw was high, and for a second, he lost the ball in the sun, but then it came back into view. He needed to make this catch. For some reason it was really important for him to do it. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck and his hands felt cold, but the ball was coming down right for him. All he had to do was catch it. It was right there for him.

He felt something hit his legs hard. His knees buckled and he ungracefully crashed to the ground, his arms and legs sprawled across the grass. The ball landed with a thud near his head and bounced over him. He looked down to see Dewey wrapped around his legs.

Hardlee pulled free and scrambled up off the ground. His shoulder stung from hitting a small rock in the dirt. He was breathing a lot faster than he should have been. Dewey bounced up next to him. He looked across the yard at his brother.

“I got him, bird!” Dewey yelled, jumping up and down. “I got him!”

Hardlee felt both of his hands come into contact with Dewey’s back, but he didn’t remember telling them to do that. It was like he couldn’t focus. Everything around him was a blur. He pushed the small boy. Pushed him hard. Dewey hit the ground and started to cry.

JayBird ran up to them and pushed Hardlee in the chest, forcing him backwards. He looked down at Dewey, who was rolling around on the ground, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Hey!” JayBird screamed. “What the hell? Nobody pushes my brother but me!”

“I...I...I,” Hardlee stammered. He couldn’t believe he’d done it himself. It was like a wave of anger just washed over him. He rubbed at his eyes with the

back of his hand, trying to clear his vision. "JayBird, I don't know what came over me."

Hardlee looked at the mark on the back of his hand from the strange guy in town yesterday. It looked like it may have gotten infected. It was red and swollen. He went over to Dewey and bent down to help him up. Instead, Dewey pushed him away and ran back towards the house.

"I'm sorry, Dewey," Hardlee said.

"No!" Dewey screamed. "I don't wanna play with you no more!"

"Should I go after him?" Hardlee asked.

"Nah," JayBird said, coming up beside him. "He's ok. He just gets real emotional is all. Let him cool down. He'll forget about it by lunch."

"I felt so mad, Jay," Hardlee said, looking over at his cousin. "I wanted to hurt him so bad. That's not me. Something's wrong."

"Yeah, well, you got a lot of stuff going on, I guess," JayBird said. "I mean with your old man going to the pokey and your mom dying, and then getting shipped out here with us. That's a lot to deal with."

Hardlee was taken back by how well his cousin had just summed up his new life. Maybe that was it. Maybe everything just came to a head and he lashed out in anger at probably the least deserving person on the planet to receive it.

"I don't know, JayBird," he said. "It feels like it's something more than that. Like there's something wrong with me. You think your Pa will freak out if we sneak back into town for a bit."

"Probably. What for?" JayBird asked.

Hardlee looked over his shoulder at the woods, remembering last night and the feeling of someone calling to him from the old lamp shanty. He could still feel it calling to him, pulling at him.

"Remember that weird guy I told you about back in town?"

"The same one you said you saw in the field?" JayBird asked.

"Yeah," Hardlee said. "That one. There's something going on with him. Something weird. I think we need to tell someone about him. Like maybe the

Sheriff.”

“Why didn’t you just tell him yesterday?” JayBird asked. “He was right there with us.”

“I don’t know,” Hardlee said. “It kind of seemed like we were in enough trouble at the moment. But it’s been bothering me ever since.”

“You just want to go and find that girl,” JayBird laughed, punching Hardlee in the shoulder. “Admit it! You’re sweet on her, aren’t you?”

“What? No!” Hardlee protested. “I mean, she’s pretty cool and all, but I don’t like her like her. Why? Do you?”

“All the girls want a piece of the JayBird,” he grinned and flexed both arms in his best professional wrestling pose. “But I suppose I could let you have just one of them.”

“Thanks, cousin,” Hardlee said as he rubbed his shoulder where JayBird had just punched him.

“Just don’t get used to it,” Jaybird replied. “I’ll go get the bikes. Pa went out on a repair job, so he’ll be gone most of the day. I’ll tell Ma we’re going riding down at the dumps. She’ll buy that.”

Hardlee stood in the backyard waiting for JayBird to come back with the bikes. He turned around to face the woods. He could almost hear his name being called. In the distance, it looked like a soft red light pulsed between the branches, beating in time with his heart. A soft thump...thump...thump.

“We’re burning day light here, cuz,” JayBird was calling from behind him, a bike in each hand.

Hardlee stared into the woods, trying to make out what they were saying to him. He felt there were answers back there. He just didn’t know to what.

“What am I? Your ballet?” JayBird asked.

“Valet,” Hardlee corrected.

“Whatever. Let’s ride, twinkle toes,” he said.

The two boys jumped on their bikes and headed down the driveway towards town.

“Where we headed exactly?” JayBird asked.

“You know where the sheriff’s house is?”

“Yeah, of course, I do,” JayBird answered, seeming slightly offended by Hardlee questioning his knowledge of everyone in town.

“Well, then, lead the way,” Hardlee waited for his cousin to pedal up ahead of him, and then fell in line behind him. He was already excited about the prospect of seeing Aza again and was thinking what he should say to her to make her laugh. He enjoyed seeing her smile.

“We’re wasting daylight, lover boy,” JayBird yelled back to him.

“Coming,” Hardlee said as he quickened his pace to catch up to his cousin.

THE SWERVES IN THE CURVES

The morning light poured into the truck's cab through the cracked windshield, hitting Curtis' face like a sun-filled kaleidoscope. He shielded his eyes with his hand, trying to get his bearings and figure out where he was.

He looked around the inside of his truck. Glass was everywhere. He could smell anti-freeze and oil mixed together. The truck wasn't running. That was a plus. He grabbed the steering wheel with one hand to help pull him up in the seat. The pain that shot through his stomach convinced him he was better where he was.

He looked down at his side. There was dried blood all over his shirt. He could see the open wound from the knife attack back at the bar. It was starting to come back to him. He remembered being inside, talking to Shelly. They laughed. There was some belligerent drunk asshole. He was leaving. The guy attacked him. They fought. The guy stuck him. He stabbed him back. The guy quit moving.

Curtis' thoughts were racing a mile a minute. His breathing sped up. He could feel himself beginning to panic.

"Get it together, man," he mumbled. "One thing at a time."

What happened after that, he tried to remember. It was coming back to him in flashes. He wanted to call for help. For himself. For the guy. But there was someone else there in the parking lot. He couldn't remember who it was. It didn't make sense to him why he couldn't remember them.

He tried to sit up again and grabbed for the steering wheel. Fighting through the pain, he eased his way up into a sitting position. He looked out the broken windshield and saw a tree embedded about a foot and a half into his hood. He was in the woods somewhere. He couldn't see a road anywhere around him. There was a large hole in the passenger side of the windshield. He leaned in as close as his side would allow him and saw a shiny red piece of cloth hanging from the broken glass. He looked at the empty passenger seat.

The girl! He remembered there was a girl in the parking lot last night. What was her name? Wendy? Willow? Winter-something! She came up to him and convinced him to leave with her. She wanted to take him somewhere. She said he'd be safe. They were driving away from town. She was sitting right there in his truck, smiling at him.

Maybe it was the beers combined with the blood loss, but he remembered feeling groggy, weak. A deer jumped in front of them and he swerved his truck to miss it. He overcompensated and the truck went off the road and down into the woods. Then everything went black.

He looked at the passenger seatbelt, lying unsecured on the seat, and then turned his head back to the gaping hole in the windshield.

"Oh, god," he said. "Not her too."

The pain he felt just sitting up was nothing to the searing anguish that tore through him reaching for the door handle and stepping out of the truck. Every step felt like his side was on fire. It felt like a thousand needles being jabbed into his side, all at the same time. He held onto the open truck door to keep himself up.

He slowly staggered around the back of the truck, stepping over debris and limbs, until he made it up to the passenger side. There was a small tree wedged against the door, so he had to move around it before stopping at the windshield. There was some kind of liquid dripping from the glass. He bent in closer to get a better look. It looked like thick green goo smeared over the window. He reached out and touched it with his hand. It felt slimy between his fingers, like jelly.

"What the actual hell?"

He made his way to the front of the truck, thinking he may not want to see what was there. Instead of the body of a dead girl, he saw more of the same green goo on the ground, leading off into the woods. Maybe she was carrying something in a bottle with her and it broke when they slammed into the tree.

He couldn't remember anything in her hands last night though.

"Hello?" he called out.

He guessed it was still pretty early in the morning. The sun had only begun to rise overhead. He stepped over some branches and followed the trail of green liquid. His side was burning with each step he took. He looked down and saw fresh blood oozing from the wound in his side. Leaning against a nearby tree, he stopped to catch his breath. In a matter of hours, his entire life had been ripped out from under him. The reality of it was still sinking in.

He heard someone moan up ahead, and he pushed on. He rounded a group of large rocks and saw a woman lying against them, her dressed in tatters and hair covered in twigs and brush. A small puddle of the same green liquid was next to her on the rock. Rushing up to her, he knelt down and checked her neck for a pulse. He didn't feel any.

"Oh, God," he said. "No. No. No."

He was responsible for two deaths now. His life was over. That was it for him. He'd lose everything, not that he had much to begin with.

"You..." she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

His head snapped back up as he looked at her beautiful green eyes. He ran his thumb across her cheek, holding the side of her neck in his hand.

"Oh, thank you," he said, softly smiling at her. "I thought you were dead."

"Not dead," she said. "Just weak."

Curtis stripped off his jacket, even with the jolt of pain it caused him. He was just happy he hadn't turned into a double murderer overnight. Pulling her up gently from the rock, he wrapped the coat around her shoulders. She coughed and green blood trickled from the side of her mouth.

"I'm glad you found me," she said, returning his smile. She reached up and touched his cheek with her hand. "I thought I could make it home myself, but I was too tired."

"We've got to get you out of here," Curtis said. "Do you think you can walk?"

"No. No walk," she said. "Too weak."

“Then I’ll carry you,” he replied, not sure how he was going to do that with his own injuries, but he knew he had to try. He owed it to her. He pulled her up from the rocks, her eyes wincing in pain.

“Stop. Stop,” she repeated. “Stop.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what to do. I may have to leave you here and try to find some help.” Curtis looked around again, searching for any trace of a road or building or smoke in the distance. “There has to be something around here. We couldn’t have gotten that far out of town. Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out. I won’t let you...”

“Shhhh,” she cooed. “It’s alright. I do need something from you though.”

“What?” Curtis asked. “Anything. Just say it.”

A giant black talon ripped into the back of Curtis’ head, cracking through his skull and exiting out his cheek. The pain was excruciating and his death was almost instantaneous.

The last thing Curtis saw before he slipped away into his final darkness was the girl’s face melting away from her flesh as she pulled him in closer.

“To feed,” she said, gently stroking his cheek. “I knew you were a strong one.”

LAND SHARK!

JayBird pressed his face up against the glass, peering inside the window.

"I don't think she's home," he said to Hardlee, who was standing next to him on the porch of Aza's house.

"Are you sure we're even at the right place?" Hardlee asked, rubbing the back of his hand. His cut was throbbing for some reason, ever since the incident with Dewey in the back yard it had started bothering him.

"Of course, I'm sure," JayBird shot back. "This is where the old sheriff lived, and the new one took over for him. Right?"

"That doesn't mean they keep the same house, JayBird," Hardlee said, finding his cousin's logic fascinating at times. "Just because you do the same job, doesn't mean you can't find a different house."

JayBird finally gave up with peeking inside the window and came down off his tip toes. He turned and stepped off the porch, motioning for Hardlee to follow him.

"Come on," he said. "Let's check the back."

"Check the back?" Hardlee asked. "Why would there be anything different from the front?"

"I don't know," JayBird said. "That's what they do on all those cop shows."

“Sure. That makes sense then, because TV is always accurate,” Hardlee said, more to himself than to his cousin. “And yet here I go, following you back there. Just don’t get us shot. Ok?”

They walked around to the back of the house. It was a well-maintained two-story home with white siding and blue shutters. It wasn’t new or fancy, but it was obvious someone took good care of it over the years. It was the kind of house Hardlee had always wanted to live in, back when it was him and his mom and dad. One where he had posters on the wall in his bedroom, and there was a desk with his computer and gaming system and a big window sill where he could sit and read books, or just watch outside.

They walked down the sidewalk to the back porch, and JayBird wasted no time scaling up the steps to look into the side window on the porch. Hardlee decided to remain in the yard, just in case he needed a head start when the home owner came out shooting. He still wasn’t convinced that was even where Aza lived.

“Anything?” Hardlee asked from his safer vantage point.

“Nothing,” JayBird answered. “Not even a cat or a dog inside. I think we’re busted.”

Hardlee turned to walk back towards the front of the house.

“Ok,” he said. “Let’s just head back to town and try to come up with another plan.”

“Hold on a minute,” JayBird said, his face still pressed up to the glass. “I think I see something. I do. It’s Aza, and she ain’t wearing nothing but her britches. Holy cow! And she’s dancing around.”

“Her what?” Hardlee turned and ran up the porch steps next to his cousin. “You’re lying!” He wasn’t a pervert or anything. It was more to prove JayBird was full of shit. He pressed his face up to the window to get a look inside. He saw a darkened kitchen, table, fridge, box of cereal on the counter. No dancing Aza.

JayBird grabbed the back of Hardlee’s head and pushed his face into the glass, rubbing it back and forth.

“Oh, Hardlee,” he said in his best Aza impression. “You’re so big and strong. I was hoping you’d come over and peep in my window. You big perv!”

Hardlee spun around and pushed JayBird's hand away.

"Knock it off," he yelled. "I'm not a perv! You're the one peeping in all the windows!"

"Sure looked like it from where I'm standing," JayBird chuckled. "There's still drool on the glass. Hope they don't test for DNA."

Hardlee used the bottom of his shirt to frantically wipe his spit off the window as JayBird laughed behind him.

"You're an asshole," Hardlee said.

Someone called out from behind them.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing up there? I'm calling the cops!"

Both Hardlee and Jay froze in place, Hardlee's shirt tail still touching the bottom of the window. They glanced at each other, before the person spoke again.

"We don't take kindly to peeping JayBird's around here."

JayBird? Hardlee spun around and saw Aza staring up the steps at them from her bicycle.

"Hello, boys," she said in her normal voice. "Looking for someone?"

Hardlee grabbed Jaybird by the shirt collar and pulled him down the porch stairs.

"We were, I mean, JayBird here said this was, we wanted to, you know, come find you," Hardlee finally spit it out.

"I told him you were in there dancing around," JayBird added.

Hardlee retaliated with a quick punch to his cousin's shoulder.

"Liar!" he shouted. "No, he didn't, Aza. I mean...I'd never..."

She just laughed and got off her bike, dropping it down on the lawn. She walked up on the porch and pulled a key out from her pocket.

"You two want to come in for a soda pop?" she asked.

“Sure thing,” JayBird answered before Hardlee had a chance to argue.

She brushed by Hardlee and unlocked the door. “Only one rule. No dancing when you get inside.”

“But I didn’t...” Hardlee protested. “It was JayBird who...”

JayBird pushed him in the back. “Let’s go, Romeo. I’m thirsty.”

JayBird and Hardlee sat at the kitchen table as Aza got two cans of cola from the fridge and handed them each one.

“You’re not having one?” Hardlee asked.

“They hurt my stomach,” she answered, filling up a glass with water from the sink. “I’ll take a glass of water over soda any day.”

“So, where were you?” JayBird asked as he downed half the can in his first gulp, followed with a loud burp. “Sorry. Pa never lets us have soda. He says it rots our brains.”

“Actually, I went into town looking for you two,” Aza said, taking a drink from her glass. “I guess we all had the same idea.”

“Yeah, seems like it,” Hardlee answered. “There’s definitely something weird going on around here. There’s some strange guy, and I think he’s following me.”

“What do you mean ‘strange guy’?” Aza asked.

“Well, I first saw him out in the woods with Jay the other day. He was just watching us up in the cell tower,” Hardlee explained. “Then I saw him again in town after we snuck in the store and everything went crazy with the guy and...well, you know. You were there.”

The kitchen telephone started ringing and cut off Hardlee’s recollection of events. After the third ring, Aza walked over to it and held her finger up to her lips.

“Hold on, Hardlee,” she said. “It might be my dad, so keep quiet. He doesn’t want anyone in the house when he’s not here.”

“Hello,” she said. “No. He isn’t here right now. No. I don’t know when he’ll be back.”

Hardlee looked over at JayBird, who already finished his drink and placed the empty can down on the table.

“Braappp,” JayBird belched again, that time twice as loud. “Sorry. I told you we never get none.”

Hardlee just shook his head at his cousin, as Aza put her finger up to her lips and shot him a dirty look.

“You say you know what’s going on in town and why people are dying. You want to tell the Sheriff all about it. And who are you again?”

Hardlee and JayBird exchanged surprised looks of their own. JayBird reached for Hardlee’s still half full soda can, but Hardlee pulled it away from him.

“Yes, ma’am,” Aza said. “I’ll be sure to tell the Sheriff to come see you right away. Uh huh, I’ll make sure he gets the message. I will. Ok. Bye.”

Aza hung up the phone and just stood there in silence.

“Well,” Hardlee said, he couldn’t wait any longer. “Are you going to tell us what that was all about?”

Aza sat down at the table with the two of them.

“It was weird. She said she needed to talk to the Sheriff right away,” she said. “She knew what was going on in town, and he’d want to come see her as soon as he could. She said she could only tell him in person. Her name was Anita Perkins”

“So, are you going to call your dad?” Hardlee asked.

Aza looked over at JayBird. “I have a better idea. JayBird, you ever hear of someone in town by that name?”

“Mrs. Perkins? Sure. My Grandma used to play bingo with her every Tuesday night at the firehall,” he answered. “Nice old lady.”

“How far away does she live?” she asked.

Hardlee saw the flash in Aza’s eyes and he already didn’t like where this was going.

“Ain’t far,” JayBird said. “Maybe fifteen to twenty minutes on bikes. She’s outside of town up in one of the hollers.”

Aza smiled and looked at them both. “Then what’s say the three of us go pay her a visit ourselves. Maybe she knows something about that weird guy who’s following you?”

“Or maybe she’s just a loon,” Hardlee added.

“What can it hurt?” Aza countered. “She’s an old lady. If she says something good, I’ll tell my dad about it, and then he can go talk to her. I say we should at least try. Who’s in?”

“I am,” JayBird said. “Can I have another one of them sodas for the road?”

“Sure,” Aza answered. “Help yourself.” She turned to Hardlee. “You in?”

“Let me get this right. You want us to ride our bikes up into woods to some crazy lady’s house and not tell anyone where we’re going?” Hardlee said.

“Pretty much,” Aza answered, followed up by placing her hand on Hardlee’s shoulder. “Come on.”

“Sounds like a great idea to me. What could possibly go wrong?” He finally conceded. There was no way he was going to look like a coward in front of her.

“Great,” Aza said. “Then we go.”

“You know I was being sarcastic,” Hardlee added.

“I know,” Aza answered. “JayBird, you take the lead. Me and Hardlee will follow you.”

“I’m a natural leader,” JayBird said, taking a fresh soda from the fridge and heading for the door. “Just try to keep up, losers.”

“This idea is getting worse by minute,” Hardlee said, following his friends out the door.

22

MISS MUFFET'S TRAGIC TUFFET

Hardlee and his friends sat on their bicycles at the end of the gravel driveway. They stared at the home in front of them. It was a small single wide house trailer in a sad state of disrepair. The land under the trailer sloped downhill pretty sharply, so the one end of the structure was supported by at least ten cement blocks stacked on top of the other at each corner. The trailer had been built onto with an apparent room added onto one side. The addition was covered in insulation board and torn plastic wrap.

"You sure this is the place?" Hardlee looked over at JayBird and asked.

"Hell, yeah, I'm sure," JayBird answered. "I used to bring tomatoes up to her back when we kept a garden. This is the place. Trust me."

"Well, I'm heading up," Aza said as she peddled up the road leading to the house. She stopped halfway and looked back. "You two coming?"

JayBird looked over at Hardley before he followed her.

"The things we do for love," he said.

"Shut up," Hardly snapped, following his cousin up the drive.

The yard looked like an unkept graveyard for lawn ornaments and knickknacks. The weeds had overtaken most everything. Hardlee noticed a small pond buried in the grass. The water was green and covered in scum.

The porch was a simple wooden platform with no railings around it. The screen door was lying against the porch. A bowl of cat food was in the corner of the porch with about a hundred flies dancing around it.

“You’re up, Hardlee,” JayBird said, pointing to the door. “Get to knocking.”

“Why me?” Hardlee asked. He looked over at Aza, who just shrugged. He got off his bike and went onto the porch. He looked back at his friends. “Stay close.”

He rapped on the door with his knuckles a couple quick times before stepping back onto the small porch.

“She’s an old lady,” JayBird teased. “She ain’t gonna hear no rap tat tatting. Knock on it like a man.”

Feeling slightly embarrassed JayBird said that in front of Aza, Hardlee stepped back to the door and pounded on in several times with the side of his fist. He looked over his shoulder. “Satisfied? There’s no one here!”

Something inside the trailer banged, and Hardlee heard feet shuffling, coming up to the door. He realized he was still standing right in front of it and tried to take a step back, but the door swung open before he could. Before he knew it, he was face to face with a large elderly African-American woman. She was wearing a purple house dress and had her hair in curlers. Her glasses were wire-rimmed and thick and had a dark tint to the lenses. She looked at Hardlee and spoke in a volume way too loud for the distance between them.

“What you doing up here?” she boomed. “I ain’t got no money to give to whatever it is you’re selling. No candy bars. No pizzas. No nothing!”

“I...I...” was all he could produce.

“What are you, boy? A sailor?” She laughed. “Aye Aye”

Aza walked up on the porch next to Hardlee.

“Ma’am, I’m the one who spoke with you on the phone. The sheriff asked us to come up here and talk to you.”

“Did he now?” The old woman eyed up both of them, running her tongue along the inside of her bottom gum as she did. Finally, she stepped back inside the house and motioned for them to follow her inside.

“Well, come on in then,” she said. “I guess you’ll have to do. And tell your friend down there to come on too.”

Aza looked back to JayBird, who was still perched on his bike, maybe thinking of a last-minute run for it.

“Come on, JayBird,” Aza said. “Don’t be rude.”

JayBird got off his bike and walked up to the door.

“Maybe you remember me, Mrs. Perkins,” he said. “I use to bring you tomatoes from our garden. The Harkers, a couple hollers over?”

The old woman smiled at him and patted him on the shoulder as he walked inside.

“Remember you? Of course, I do,” she said. “How could I forget a nice young man like you?”

The inside of the house was surprisingly neat. There was an old recliner and couch in the living room and a large television on the floor. A smaller television rested on top of that one, which was playing some daytime gameshow. There were several throw carpets all around the room and multiple different cat climbing stands scattered around. Dozens of cat toys littered the floor.

“Where’s all your cats?” Hardlee asked, before realizing that could come across as a rude question. “I mean, looks like you like your cats.”

Mrs. Perkins looked around the room at all the feline paraphernalia and just smiled. “Oh, they like to run outside when it’s light out. That’s all.” She pointed to the empty couch. “You three have a seat right over there. I’m gonna fetch some fresh squeezed lemonade before we get into it all.”

Hardlee sat down next to Aza and JayBird. JayBird leaned over towards him.

“This place smells like cat piss.”

“Shhhh,” Aza shushed him and followed up with an elbow to his side. “Be nice.”

JayBird’s statement may have been a little on the abrupt side, but he wasn’t lying either. It was hard to mistake that smell for anything else. Hardlee figured there wasn’t much use in complaining about it though. They wouldn’t be there that long.

It only took a minute for Mrs. Perkins to come back with a tray and three glasses of lemonade for them. She set the tray on the coffee table in front of the couch.

“Here you go, kids,” she said. “Drink up. I’ve got plenty more.”

JayBird was the first brave enough to grab a glass and take a big swig. His face immediately puckered and twisted to one side before he looked over at his friends.

“Tangy,” was all he said.

Mrs. Perkins sat in the recliner across from them, showing considerable effort to get down into her seat. She took a moment to make a couple more adjustments before she turned her attention back to them.

“You know, I’ve been here in Paw Paw for a long long time, kids,” she said. “I’ve seen a lot of things about this town change, and a lot stay the same too.”

“How long have you been here in Paw Paw?” Aza asked.

“Practically all my life,” she said. “Since the mid-forties, so this isn’t the first time I seen something like this happening around here. Pretty much comes in waves, like around every twenty years or so.”

“What happens?” It was Hardlee’s turn to ask the question.

“The killings start. People go all crazy,” she said. “They get sick in the head and start hurting one another, like they don’t know no better.”

Mrs. Perkins leaned back in her recliner as it creaked in resistance. She started slowly rocking.

“You kids believe in monsters?” she asked with no hint of amusement on her face.

“What kind of monsters?” Hardlee asked. There were all kinds of monsters, he thought, psychopaths, murderers, dragons, werewolves, goblins, math teachers. He looked at each of his friends for some type of reactions. Aza raised both eyebrows and JayBird just shrugged his shoulders.

Mrs. Perkins let a smile slip. “The kind that eats you.”

Well, Hardlee had to admit, that was pretty precise. He guessed he could cut

Mrs. Davis, his third-grade math teacher off that list.

"I don't follow," Aza finally said. "What's that have to do with what's going on in town?"

Mrs. Perkins rocked a little faster in her chair.

"You kids ever hear of something called a Jorogumo?" she asked.

"Sure. They sell those down at that taco place," JayBird said before Hardlee had a chance to stop him.

"No, child," she chuckled and repeated herself. "Jorogumo. It's one of the most dangerous shapeshifters in all of Japanese mythology. They can take the form of anyone they chose to ensnare and seduce their victims."

"You're saying there's one of them here in Paw Paw?" Aza asked.

The old woman just kept rocking in her chair.

"Yeah, but how would something like that get all way from Japan to Paw Paw, West Virginia?" Aza asked.

"The canal," Mrs. Perkins quickly shot back. "Back when it was built, they brought in immigrants from lots of different places, all over the world, some of them from Japan. They lived in tents and shanty towns all through the area. They brought their families, their cultures with them...and also their demons."

"So, you're saying there's a real actual monster out there killing people," Hardlee said. "A joro-something." He didn't want to seem rude, but his patience was wearing a little thin with the whole thing. They had actual problems to figure out and couldn't spend all morning listening to some crazy old lady ramble on about shape-shifting Japanese monsters. If it wasn't that he was sitting next to Ava on the couch, he may have gotten up and left.

"I'm saying it's been killing people for the last one hundred and fifty years, child," Mrs. Perkins replied, staring straight at Hardlee. "And it doesn't care who you or your little girlfriend are one bit."

"She's not my..." Hardlee tried to intercede.

"You all learned about the tunnel back in school, didn't ya? All the violence and deaths they had while building it. Well, that was because of the Joro. It made them workers crazy, and that made it easier to take some of them for

itself. For food.”

“Joro?” Ava asked.

“That’s what they liked to call it,” Mrs. Perkins said. “Course, it was easier back then, because people went missing all the time. Either the tunnel, or the hills just took ‘em, and nobody thought much of it. It was a much simpler time. Sometimes, I sure do miss it.”

“Okay, so why’s it back now?” JayBird broke his silence, putting down his glass of lemonade.

“Back? It never left,” the old woman said. “Every so many years, it has to feed. All the rain lately done something, messed up its pattern, so it’s back to stock up its reserves.”

“Do you have any more ice cubes?” Hardlee asked, standing up from the couch. It was getting a little too weird for him, but Aza was hanging on the woman’s every word, and JayBird just seemed glad to get some free lemonade.

“Of course, dear,” Mrs. Perkins said. “Top of the fridge.”

“Thank you.”

Hardlee walked out into the kitchen while the three of them kept talking about monsters and feeding patterns. The kitchen only had a small table, an old yellow refrigerator and a sink full of dishes, mostly cat bowls. He was still trying to listen to the conversation in the other room.

“So, honey, your dad is the new sheriff then?” Mrs. Perkins asked.

“Umm, yeah, but how did you know that?” Aza seemed surprised.

“Well, I called his house and you’re the one who answered,” she said with a chuckle. “I knew he had a young daughter, so it didn’t take much to put the two together. I’m a bit of a detective myself.”

Hardlee opened the top door of the fridge. He saw the ice tray half-filled next to something wrapped in about twenty layers of plastic wrap. He grabbed for one of the cubes from the tray, but it jumped out of his hand as he tried to make a second grab for it. It hit the ground and slid across the floor, stopping next to what Hardlee figured was the pantry door.

“Crap,” he said.

“Your father was down at the canal yesterday looking around I hear,” Mrs. Perkins was keeping the conversation going without Hardlee.

He peeked into the living room to make sure no one heard the ice cube drop before he walked over to the pantry and bent down to pick it up. He thought about leaving it, but he didn’t want Mrs. Perkins to slip and fall after they left. Scooping up the rapidly melting cube, he noticed something oozing out from under the pantry door. He bent down closer to get a better look. It was red and thick and unmistakably blood.

“He needs to be careful going down there.” Mrs. Perkins said from the other room. “You never know what you may find in that tunnel.”

Hardlee stepped back up and slowly reached for the handle to the pantry door. He imagined it stacked full of dead cats, piled one on top of the other. The smell alone would probably knock him out. He glanced back into the living room to make sure they were all still busy talking before he gently turned the handle and eased the door open.

He looked into the small space and his brain wouldn’t register what he saw. He just stood there, staring at it.

Mrs. Perkins, or at least the mangled body of Mrs. Perkins was stuffed under the bottom shelf of the storage room. Her arms and legs were bent and twisted into odd and unnatural angles to get her to fit inside. Her cheek was pressed against the floor, but her eyes were wide open, staring up at Hardlee.

His first thought was to scream, tell his friends to make a run for it, but the door was on the opposite side from the couch and between them and the exit sat Mrs. Perkins, or whatever that thing really was. He needed to be smart about it if they had any chance of getting out of there alive.

He eased the pantry door closed and crept back across the kitchen to the fridge before opening and then loudly shutting the door.

“Everything ok in there, sweetie?” The thing which was Mrs. Perkins called out.

“Oh, yeah. Fine. Just fine,” Hardlee answered. “Just getting my ice.”

He walked back into the living room, making sure to steer clear of Mrs. Perkins in her chair and sat back down on the couch. Aza looked over at him.

“Are you ok?” she asked. “You look like you’re sick or something.”

“No. No,” he said. “Just thirsty. This lemonade is so good.” He took another drink from his glass before wondering what exactly they all were consuming.

“The recipe has been in my family for ages,” Mrs. Perkins said, gently rocking in her chair.

Hardlee placed his glass on the coffee table, on top of an old magazine, and looked at his friends.

“Well, I think we got everything we came here for,” he said. “Maybe it’s time for us to go?”

“Go?” JayBird said. “Man, I love hearing about these Joro’s or whatever they are. It’s cool as shit...sorry, ma’am. Crap.”

Mrs. Perkins focused on Hardlee when she spoke. “Don’t be silly. You kids just got here. You’re not going anywhere,” she said. “Of course, I was expecting the Sheriff. He was the one I was really hoping for, but you three will do. Don’t let a good opportunity pass you by. Isn’t that what they say?”

“I think I left something out at my bike,” Hardlee said. “Just let me run out and get it, and I’ll be right back.” He stood up from the couch. “I might need some help with it. Why don’t you two come with me?”

“Now, what would you need all three of us for?” JayBird asked. “Ain’t nothing that heavy out there.”

“You’ll see,” Hardlee looked JayBird right in the eye. “Just come on.”

Hardlee realized the creaking from Mrs. Perkins rocking chair had abruptly stopped. He looked over at her. She was no longer there, just the chair still slightly moving in place. He spun around to the door and saw her standing next to it. She turned the latch and turned back towards Hardlee and his friends.

“Nobody’s going anywhere, I’m afraid,” she said with an evil smile.

“What the hell?” Aza jumped up from the couch.

“That’s not Mrs. Perkins,” Hardlee pointed at her. “The real one’s dead in the kitchen and stuffed in the pantry.”

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be,” she said to them. “The Sheriff was getting a little too close for my comfort. I needed to keep prying

eyes away from my home until I was done. He was the only one I wanted.”

“Yeah, well, your lemonade sucks,” JayBird said as he threw his glass across the room, hitting the old woman in the shoulder. The glass shattered as it hit. He rushed across the room, straight for her.

She picked him up by the neck, effortlessly holding him off the ground. She brought his face up to hers and snarled, “Foolish child.”

She threw JayBird across the room, and he smashed down onto the coffee table, breaking it into pieces. One of the shattered wooden legs hit Hardlee in the ankle. Hardlee looked down at his cousin, who wasn’t moving.

Something hissed from the hallway next to them, and Mrs. Perkins spun towards it.

“What now?” she seethed.

A cat, a really big cat, maybe bigger than any Hardlee had ever seen, jumped out from the hallway, using the top of the recliner for a springboard and then pivoting straight for the fake Mrs. Perkins’ face. The feline dug its claws into the old lady’s flesh, tearing and ripping away at her while it hissed and meowed. Screaming, the old woman clutched at the cat with both hands, trying to wrestle it free and stumbling away from the door.

In was almost like a dream how things happened next, but Hardlee remembered grabbing the broken table leg at his feet and he charged the woman. He plunged the wooden table leg into her shoulder and she cried out more in rage than pain, still trying to pull the fighting cat from her face.

“Get the door,” Hardlee screamed, as he watched Aza helping JayBird up and across the room.

“I’m trying,” Aza shouted back, trying to undo the lock.

Finally, he heard it snap free and the door swung open. Aza and JayBird took off outside.

“Hardlee! Let’s go,” she screamed from the porch.

Hardlee ran across the living room but stopped at the door and looked back. The old woman had torn the cat free. Her face was a bloody mess. She looked at Hardlee.

“You,” she said.

Hardlee ran out the door and jumped on his bike, which JayBird was holding at the ready. The three of them took off down the dirt road leading away from the house as fast as they could pedal. They looked at each other as they went but nobody said a word.

TOWERING INFERNAL

JayBird was the first back to the house. Hardlee and Aza tried to catch up with him ever since they took off from the Perkin's trailer, but he wouldn't stop for them even when they repeatedly yelled his name. The only words spoken between Hardlee and Aza on the way back were the occasional "You Ok?" and "You sure?".

Hardlee watched JayBird slide his bike to a stop in the backyard and pretty much throw it down. Him and Aza pulled into the yard and propped their bikes against a woodpile and walked over to JayBird, who was standing there silently watching the woods behind the house. Hardlee was about to say something, but JayBird spoke first.

"Alright, just what in the hell was that?" he asked. "I mean really, cause I got no words."

"I don't know, either," Hardlee said, reaching out for his cousin's shoulder. "You ok?" He'd only known him for a couple days, Hardlee knew that, but he could tell what happened back there really shook him.

"I'm just a little freaked out is all," JayBird answered. "You say the real Mrs. Perkins was stuffed in the bottom of a closet in the kitchen."

"It sure looked like it," Hardlee said, not sure how you really answered a question like that. He looked back at Aza, who shrugged her shoulders, seemingly as lost as he was regarding the whole situation. "We need to let your

mom and dad, and then Aza's dad know what's going on. You think anyone's home?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I get that," JayBird said. "I just needed a little bit to process it is all. I'm good. I'm just glad we all made it out of there."

JayBird turned back to the house and started walking that way. "Pa is out on that job still. He don't got a phone. Ma said she was going into town, so it's only Gram Gertie and Dewey. We can use the house phone inside to call Aza's dad. He'll know what to do. He's the sheriff, right?"

Before JayBird could get to the steps, Gram Gertie came out of the house, slamming the screen door behind her. She stopped on the porch and looked at the kids suspiciously.

"What the hell you kids doing here?" she asked.

"We need to use the phone, Gram," JayBird said. "It's important."

Gram Gertie shuffled over to the rocking chair on the back porch and sat down, giving a heavy sigh of relief as she went. JayBird looked back at Hardlee and Aza.

"Come on, you two," he said. "Ain't no way I'm explaining this to anyone without them thinking I'm crazy or on drugs. Aza, you're gonna have to do most of the talking."

"We're right behind you," Hardlee said, grabbing Aza by the hand and walking up the porch steps. "He'll know what to do. We can't do anything more."

"The phone's right in here," JayBird said pointing to an old rotary style phone on a small table just inside the door.

"Thanks," Aza said, picking up the receiver end of the phone and just looking at it. She pushed down on a couple of the numbers on the dial. "Ummm, nothing's happening."

JayBird snatched the phone from her hand. "Oh, gimme a break," he said. "What's the number?" He put his finger in each corresponding hole and twisted the dial until he got the whole number entered. Hardlee had to admit, he'd never seen anyone operate a phone like that before in his life.

"What kind of phone is that?" Hardlee asked.

“A poor people’s phone,” JayBird said, smirking at his cousin. He listened to the receiver for a second before handing it back to Aza. “Here,” he said. “It’s ringing.”

Hardlee sat down on a wooden bench in the hall and watched Aza. Her face was a mix of amazement and controlled panic. The more Hardlee got to know her, the more things about her there was for him to like.

“Dad?” she asked into the phone. “It’s me. I know I’m not home. I know you told me to stay there.” She pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at Hardley, making a face at him.

“I know I’m in big trouble, but listen,” she pleaded. “We went to see old Mrs. Perkins. She attacked us. Dad?” She looked at Hardlee again. “The connections real bad, he’s coming in and out.”

“Yeah, well, sorry us simple mountain people don’t got better signal,” JayBird chimed in from where he stood near the door.

“Yeah. Attacked,” she continued. “I’m fine. I’m with Hardlee and JayBird. I know. You told me to stay from them. No. It wasn’t their idea. It was mine. I know.”

Hardlee had to admit, he felt a bit of a rush being considered the “bad boy” to a parent, especially one whose daughter he had growing feelings for.

“Dad! Don’t go back to the canal,” Aza yelled into the phone. “Stay away from the tunnels. Yeah. Tunnell! Dad? Dad?” She hung up the phone and looked over at JayBird. “Can you try to call him back?”

“Sure,” JayBird said, redialing the number with the same exhaustive procedure. He kept the receiver up to his ear and looked at Aza. “All I get is a busy signal.”

“Shit,” she said. “We’re going to have to ride into town. They can reach him on his radio from the police station.”

“Okay,” Hardlee agreed. “It looks like that’s our best option. Let’s go.”

The trio walked back out onto the porch where Gram Gertie was still in her rocking chair, puffing away at her pipe.

“Say, where’s your brother at, boy?” she said, re-lighting the end of her pipe.

“What you mean, Gram Gertie?” he asked. “I figured Dewey was here with you somewhere.”

“With me,” she repeated, taking a long puff. “Do you see him anywhere ‘round here? I ain’t seen that boy since morning. He said he was going with you two. He was upset about some football thing and said something about climbing something and showing you how strong he was. I didn’t pay it much mind.”

“Climb something?” JayBird asked.

Hardlee immediately knew what she meant and watched the realization sink into JayBird’s face.

“The tower!” JayBird yelled. “He’s gonna climb the tower.”

JayBird pushed passed Hardlee and Aza and jumped off the porch, heading towards his bike in the yard. He looked back at them.

“What the Hell are you two waiting for?” JayBird yelled. “Come on!”

“But what about riding into town?” Aza protested. “We need to tell my dad about Mrs. Perkins.”

“It’s gonna have to wait,” JayBird yelled back at her. “I gotta get to Dewey! Come on!”

Hardlee and Aza ran after their friend and jumped on their own bikes, taking off through the yard and onto the path leading in the woods behind the house.

“Be back by supper!” Gram Gertie yelled out to them from the porch.

Hardlee raced up beside his cousin.

“You don’t really think he’d try to climb up there by himself, do you?” Hardlee asked.

“Yup. I sure do,” JayBird said, racing down the path and again taking the lead.

Going as fast as they were, it didn’t take long to get to the field. Hardlee dropped his bike and glanced over at Aza, who was following his lead. They raced into the tall grasses, calling out for Dewey.

“Dewey! Dewey!” JayBird yelled. “Where you at? You ain’t in no trouble! Promise!”

Jaybird looked up from the base of the tower to the platform high overheard.

“You up there, Dewey? Come on now. This ain’t no time to be foolin’ around!”

“I don’t see him,” Hardlee said, running up next to JayBird and trying to catch his breath. “We’d see him if he was up there, wouldn’t we?”

JayBird spun around and turned his attention to the ground around the base of the tower. “Yeah. He ain’t up there.”

Aza came running up behind Hardlee and grabbed him by the arm.

“Sorry. I didn’t know which way you guys were going when we got to the field. I got turned around,” she said. She looked at JayBird, who was frantically searching the ground around them. “No sign of his brother?”

“None,” Hardlee answered. He looked at Aza, who seemed a little shaken, like something was slightly different with her. “You, ok?”

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she said. “I’ve just never been out here before. Just trying to get my bearings is all.”

JayBird started climbing the tower and looked down at Hardlee.

“I’m going up to the platform to get a better view,” he said. “Stay down here in case I spot something.”

“Got it,” Hardlee replied. He didn’t need to be told twice to keep both feet on the ground, especially with Aza there watching him.

JayBird scaled up the metal tower almost thirty feet before he turned around, hanging onto one of the crossbars, and looking out into the field. He searched the outer field surrounding them before looking closer to them.

“There!” he yelled to Hardlee, pointing to somewhere nearby in the field.

Hardlee and Aza ran in that direction, out into the tall grass of the field. Hardlee looked back up at JayBird, who was still hanging from the tower.

“Keep going,” he yelled to them. “Up ahead to your left a little.”

Hardlee pushed through the brush and came out into a little clearing where the grass had all been matted down. Aza was right behind him. He pointed down at the ground and she followed his finger, gasping when she saw it.

“What is it?” JayBird yelled from the tower.

“You better come down here and see for yourself,” Hardlee yelled back up to his cousin. He wasn’t about to try to put this into words.

“That can’t be good, can it?” Aza asked him.

“No. I don’t think it is either,” Hardlee agreed.

A few seconds later, JayBird came crashing through the brush into the clearing with them. He looked at both of their faces, and then turned his attention to the ground.

“Sonofabitch!” he shouted.

JayBird bent down and picked up Dewey’s baseball cap. Hardlee immediately recognized it. It was the same one the boy had been wearing the last two days.

“Is that Dewey cap?” he asked, just wanting to be sure, hoping he was wrong.

“Yeah,” JayBird confirmed. “It’s the only one he ever wears. He loves this thing. We bought it for him at the flea market last summer.”

“What does that mean?” Aza asked. “Maybe he’s just lost out here somewhere? He may just have dropped it here, or he got lost, stopping in the clearing and left it here by mistake. We could split up and look for him.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Hardlee said. “This is the same place I saw that weird guy yesterday. The same weird guy from in town. Mister Scratch. I think he’s following us, and I think he has Dewey.”

“But why would he take Dewey?” JayBird asked, a range of emotions storming in his eyes. “He didn’t do nothing to no one. Boy wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I think Scratch wants me,” Hardlee said. “I don’t know why, but I can just feel it.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin he found near the

lamp shanty behind JayBird's house.

"He said he left this behind your house for me to find," Hardlee continued. "He knew I found it. He's been watching me since I got here."

"And now the sick sonofabitch got Dewey," JayBird said. "Just like the others."

"The others," Aza repeated. "Wait a minute. My dad said they were down at the tunnel the other day and found stuff from some from the missing folks in town. And Mrs. Perkins, or whatever the hell she was, knew my dad had been down there and said something about him getting too close."

"So, what are you trying to say, Aza?" JayBird asked, clenching and unclenching his fists as he talked. "Spit it out already!"

"The tunnel," Hardlee chimed in. "We need to go down to the tunnel. That's where he took Dewey. She's right."

"Ok, but do we go by ourselves?" Aza asked. "Shouldn't we get some adults involved?"

"We don't got no time for that," JayBird said. "We'd have to ride all the way into town and then double back to get out to the tunnel. You're talking maybe an hour. Dewey don't got that kind of time. I can feel it. We can be there on the bikes in no time. I'm going after him."

"And what are we going to do if we find them?" Aza asked. "We don't have anything to fight him with."

Hardlee reached into his pocket for his dad's pocketknife, which was still there. He didn't even know these people forty-eight hours ago. They were strangers. Now, JayBird and Dewey were the only real family he had, and Aza made him feel like maybe the world wasn't all rotten. She made him feel good about himself, something he hadn't done for a long time, ever since his mom died.

"I'm in," he said.

"Alright then, let's get the bikes," Aza said, heading back into the field. "I can't stand around with you two losers all day."

Hardlee felt his hand throbbing. He looked down at it. The redness and swelling seemed to be spreading. He looked out into the woods, but saw

SHANTY RED

nothing. A cold chill wound its way up his back. He shook it off and followed his friends back out of the field.

THE OLD SCRATCH

Hardlee stood along the bank, looking down at the water flowing near the entrance to the tunnel, the one he'd heard so much about. He had to admit, it was kind of neat to look at. The canal ran right into the face of the rocks. A stone path was to the left of the running waters with a wooden banister to keep travelers from falling down in, he guessed. The face of the tunnel was built with large stones around the archway, and there was a small waterfall that ran over the rocks to the opposite side, feeding into the canal. He could see why people would come from all around to get a look at it. Under the right circumstances, he would enjoy being there. Those definitely weren't them. He'd have preferred to be pretty much anywhere else right then.

Hardlee looked up at the sky. There was a storm blowing in. The clouds above them had turned dark during the ride there, and he felt the occasional drop of rain on his cheek as they rode. The sun was nowhere in sight, and the light filtering into the tunnel stopped not far from the entrance.

JayBird was a nervous wreck the whole ride over there. He kept saying how he promised never to let anything happen to his brother and that it was his responsibility to keep him safe. He promised his dad he would. Hardlee filled Aza in on all of his interactions with Mister Scratch back in town and the episode in the woods behind their house at the old mine entrance. If it freaked her out, she didn't show it. She could have turned around, made an excuse, said she was going to find her dad while Hardlee and JayBird went to the tunnel, lots of things, but she stayed right by their side.

"Okay," Aza said, as the three of them gazed at the tunnel entrance. "What now?"

“Well,” JayBird said. “We go in and find my brother. That’s what.”

“Have you ever been in there before?” Hardlee asked.

“Sure. Bunch of times,” JayBird answered. “I practically grew up running around here.”

“How dark does it get in there?” Aza asked.

“Pretty dark,” JayBird admitted. “Especially with the storm coming. We probably should have brought some flashlights.”

Hardlee felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He looked over at his cousin, who was just staring into the abyss.

“Well, if you weren’t such a dumb-ass, maybe you’d have thought of that before we got here,” Hardlee snapped. He didn’t know where that even came from, only that he had an intense anger towards JayBird suddenly.

“Whoa,” Aza said. “Easy, Hardlee. We’ll figure something out. We just need to stay together.”

“Figuring things out isn’t real high on that moron’s list,” Hardlee added. “Let’s rush down to a tunnel and go inside looking for some crazy guy. Great plan.”

JayBird dropped his bike and marched up to Hardlee. “You got something to say to me, Hardlee?”

“Gee, I think I just did,” Hardlee said, staring his cousin in the eye. “What the hell kind of name is JayBird anyway? It sounds about as hillbilly as your family.”

“I’d say about as good a one as Hardlee,” JayBird shot back. “Like you’re hardly worth the effort it’d take to kick your ass.”

“Umm, guys?” Aza said, still on her bike. “What are you two doing?”

“This has been boiling up ever since I got her, Aza,” Hardlee said, still keeping his eyes on JayBird. “Ever since I got stuck in Hillbilly Hell with this idiot cousin of mine and his backwater family.”

JayBird shoved Hardlee, who fell to the ground. He glanced over to Aza and felt the sting of embarrassment before jumping back to his feet.

“You don’t talk about my family,” JayBird said, curling his fingers into fists. “You’re the one with a felon for a Daddy and a dead Momma.”

Hardlee lunged forward and tackled JayBird around the waist. They both tumbled down over the side of the hill towards the water below them. “Leave my mom out of this, asshole! She didn’t do nothing!”

“Neither did mine!” JayBird shot back. He got a good gut shot in on Hardlee, who felt the air rush out of the lungs. His chest burned, but there was no way he was giving ground with Aza watching. Instead, he twisted around and pinned JayBird to the ground.

“Inbred jackass!” Hardlee shouted.

“Dickwad!” JayBird yelled back.

Aza was standing on top of the hill, shouting down at them both.

“Guys! Stop it,” she yelled. “This isn’t helping us find Dewey! Come on! We don’t have time for this!”

Hardlee’s vision blurred from the pain in his side, but it didn’t matter. All he knew was he wanted to hurt JayBird, make him feel the same way he felt inside. He slammed JayBird’s head down on the ground, catching a flat rock embedded in the dirt. JayBird seemed dazed by it, and his arms went limp at his sides. Hardlee dragged JayBird to the edge of the water, grabbing him with both hands by the collar of the boy’s shirt. He plunged JayBird’s head down into the water. JayBird came to and clawed and scratched at Hardlee’s arm, but he had leverage and a good grip on his cousin. Hardlee just wanted the pain in his head to go away. He had to make it stop.

Suddenly, he felt Aza next to him, pounding at his shoulders with her fists.

“Hardlee!” she screamed. “Stop it! Stop! Let him go! You’re killing him!”

He could barely feel her blows. All his attention and focus and feeling was directed at keeping JayBird’s head under the water, long enough to make him stop, keep him quiet for good. It would be over soon. JayBird splashed his arms in the water, trying to find some leverage of his own to push himself up. Aza’s screaming next to him was all but muted as he concentrated on holding his cousin down.

The first gunshot ripped passed Hardlee. It sounded like a canon going off in the distance, but he could almost feel the force of the bullet as it passed. He

froze in place, still holding JayBird under the water. The second shot seemed closer and snapped him back to reality. He felt Aza pounding on his shoulder and screaming at him. He saw JayBird fighting for his life, his face twisted in the waters below him. He let go of JayBird and fell away from him, dropping back to the hillside behind him. Aza rushed into the water to help JayBird. Pulling him out of the water, he dropped to all fours, gagging and coughing up water. Hardlee looked down at his hands, his knuckles bloodied from the fight.

Someone was yelling at them in the distance.

“Get back,” the voice yelled. “Stay away from them!”

Hardlee looked and saw two men rushing towards them. One of them had a pistol in his hand. He recognized them from the incident in town. It was Aza’s dad and one of his deputies.

“Get on the ground,” Aza’s dad yelled, closing the gap between them. “Aza, keep down! Don’t run! Last warning!”

“I’m sorry,” Hardlee yelled back, putting his hands in the air. “I didn’t mean...I don’t know what happened. I’d never...”

Hardlee watched the men’s faces, and realized they weren’t looking at him. They were looking at someone behind them. He spun around and saw Mister Scratch running for the tunnel’s entrance, but with a new noticeable limp. Hardlee figured out who the gunshots were meant for. Scratch ran into the tunnel along the walking path and was lost in the shadows almost immediately.

He looked over to Aza and JayBird, who was still recovering and spewing up canal water. Aza was crying and looking right at Hardlee. The look on her face told him all he needed to know about how she felt right then.

“What’s the matter with you,” she said. “You could have killed him.”

“I was...something was telling me to hurt him. I didn’t want to,” he said, as Aza’s dad rushed up to them.

“What in the hell is going on here?” he asked, pointing towards the entrance to the tunnel. He looked over at his deputy. “Keep your gun out and keep that entrance covered. We don’t need him sneaking back out of there and coming at us.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, unholstering his gun and following his orders.

The sheriff moved over to Aza and JayBird and bent down next to them. “You alright, son?” he asked. JayBird just nodded back.

“What are you doing here, Dad?” Aza asked.

“After the phone call, and only hearings bits and pieces of what you were trying to tell me, I figured this is where you kids were headed,” he said. “Me and John came down over the hill and saw these two boys fighting and some guy behind you with some kind of blade or something in his hand.”

“Behind me?” Aza asked, looking over her shoulder at the tunnel.

“Yeah, that’s why I yelled,” her dad said. “He wasn’t stopping, so I shot. I’m pretty sure I hit him too.” He looked over at Hardlee. “What were you two fighting about?”

“I don’t really know,” Hardlee said. “We were fine, and then I just got real angry. I don’t know what came over me. I just wanted to hurt someone. Anyone. JayBird, I’m so sorry, man.”

“It’s ok,” JayBird finally coughed up enough water to speak. “I gotta admit, I was feeling something like that too. If I’d a got the chance, I’d have probably been the one dunking you.”

“When I started beating you on the back,” Aza said. “I was kind of enjoying it too.”

“Seems like there’s been a lot of unchecked anger around here lately, and it seems like the answers are in there,” Aza’s dad said, pointing at the tunnel.

“Sheriff, you might want to see this,” Deputy John said, standing between them and the canal entrance and looking down at the ground.

“What is it?” he asked, as he walked over and looked down. “What in the hell is that? Green blood?”

Hardlee walked close enough to see what they were staring at. The ground was splattered with green goo. Aza and JayBird came up beside him. He stuck his fist out to JayBird, who returned the gesture with a tap.

“We good, cuz?” Hardlee asked.

“Yeah. I got you,” he replied.

“It was the same guy from before,” Hardlee said. “It was Mister Scratch.”

JayBird took a few steps towards the entrance.

“He’s got Dewey in there,” he said. “I know it.”

A muffled scream came from somewhere deep inside the tunnel. JayBird immediately took off, running for the entrance.

“Dewey!”

“JayBird! Wait!” Hardlee yelled, and then ran after him. He just tried to drown him. He wasn’t about to let him face whatever was in there alone.

Aza took a step towards the tunnel and her dad grabbed her shoulder.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, looking down at her.

She pulled free and ran after them.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” she said. “They’re my friends”

And with that she was running next to Hardlee as they tried to catch up with JayBird. He glanced over at her.

“Aza, get back here,” her dad yelled, still standing with the deputy. “We need to call in for back up and get more resources out here. We need to...shit! Come on, John! We’re going in!”

25

I GOT THE SHAFT

“Hold on,” Sheriff Rowland yelled as he caught up to the kids just inside the tunnel’s entrance. “Wait a minute!”

He got the three of them to stop along the walkway. The one boy, JayBob, he thought Aza called him that outside, seemed wired pretty tight. If the boy’s brother was actually in there somewhere, he wasn’t very hopeful of what they’d find based on everything he’d witnessed in the last 48 hours. He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder to try to snap him out of his mania and calm him down some.

“Easy, son,” he said. “We’ll find your brother. But we have to be smart about it.”

“It’s just that, he doesn’t like change,” JayBird said. “He doesn’t like things different, so if he’s in here, he’s in really bad shape in his head. I gotta help him, mister.”

“We will. I promise,” Rowland said. That was a phrase he’d said one too many times in his line of work, and he hadn’t always been able to see it through. Still, people needed to believe that. They needed hope.

Rowland pulled out his flashlight from a metal ring on his side and lit up the whole side of the tunnel. One thing the law enforcement industry did right was make a worthwhile flashlight. He could appreciate that. He looked over at Deputy John, who was still coming up behind them.

“You got your light with you?” he asked.

In response, the deputy pulled out his own light and lit up the other half of the passage. "Always," he said.

Rowland looked over at Aza, who was standing next to the other boy, Hardlee. She seemed to gravitate towards him. He didn't like that, but there were bigger problems at the moment.

"Everyone, stay close," he said, as he took the front position in line and brought Aza in directly behind him, more so he could keep her in arm's reach. Deputy John took his cue and moved to the rear, putting the two boys between them.

Slowly, they moved down the passage until whatever light coming in from the entrance was gone, and they were in total dark except for the two flashlights. The path was well-travelled by locals and tourists and the footing was solid enough most of the way. Plenty of bicyclists traveled the tunnel too, but there was signage at both ends telling them to dismount and walk their bikes while in the tunnel. The path wasn't always level and there were plenty of water-filled pot holes all throughout. On top of all that, he knew there was something else in the tunnel, something hurt and feeling cornered. Those were two things you never wanted when you were tracking someone down.

"Here," Rowland said, shining the light in front of him. Some of the same green blood they found outside was on the path. "He went this way. Stay sharp. Aza, stay close behind me."

They didn't make it another twenty feet before Rowland stopped again. That time, there was more blood, but it was along the tunnel wall, on one of the large cracks along the side. He had hoped they would follow the trail all the way through the tunnel and back out to the opposite side. He should have known better.

"There's some kind of opening here," he said. "It looks like this Scratch guy went through it. I think it's time you kids turned back. Take Deputy John's flashlight and head back the way we came in. We'll check this out. I promise."

"You'll need both of your lights in there," Aza spoke up. "We came this far. We're going in."

"When did you get so defiant?" he asked, turning towards her.

"It runs in the family," she replied with a quick smirk.

"Ok," he gave in. "Just stay close." He wasn't crazy about the idea of the

kids walking alone back out of the tunnel either, so it was just as well they stay where he could protect them.

They squeezed through the opening in the tunnel wall. It was tight, but taking it slowly, they made it about ten feet in and then the passage opened up enough for them to walk freely again. The path took a noticeable slant down, going lower and lower below the surface. They continued their descent until the path finally came to a dead end with only a solid stone wall ahead of them.

"I think this might be it, kids," Rowland said, shining his light all around the passage. "I don't see any way to move on. We must have missed something. Another path that led off from this one."

"Over here," Deputy John said from the back of the group. "It looks like there's a hole going down deeper and some kind of ladder."

Rowland grabbed Aza by the shoulders and slipped around her and the boys to join the deputy. He shined his flashlight down into the hole.

"It looks like there's a rope ladder with metal rungs," Rowland said. "Someone else must have found this place and brought back some equipment."

JayBird came up next to him. "I'll go down there, sir. I'm small. I can do it."

"I appreciate that, kid," Rowland said. "But if anyone's going down there, it's me." He looked over at Deputy John. "Stay here with the kids. I'll check it out."

He wedged the flashlight between his cheek and shoulder and eased his foot down into the hole, finding the first rung about three feet down. Slowly, he lowered himself, finding a new rung with each foot, until he could grip one with his hand and then climb down like a ladder. The light wasn't shining directly below him but the space was small enough he could see where he was going. After about fifteen feet down, he found himself in a new passage.

Rowland looked around. Unbelievable. There was a whole new set of tunnels stretching out from where he stood. Someone had taken the time to put in support beams sporadically along the passage. He yelled up to the others.

"I'm okay," he said. "It's a tunnel. John, send down the kids and then you can follow them. Watch your steps on the ladder."

Aza was the first one down. She jumped off the last rung and landed on the ground with a thump. Turning around, her dad saw the surprise on her face.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped. “Is this place for real?”

“Looks that way,” he said. “I should have my head examined for bringing you down here though.”

“I’m fine, Dad,” she said. “With everything that’s going on, being next to the town Sheriff probably isn’t the worst place to be.”

“Good point,” he admitted, watching as Hardlee and then JayBird both made their way down the ladder. “Okay, John. You’re up!”

“Coming,” he responded, as Rowland saw a pair of boots appear on the ladder rungs.

The deputy made it down to almost the last rung, when his foot slipped and one of the ropes snapped, causing him to fall the rest of the way. He landed awkward on his ankle and cried out in pain.

“Dammit,” he screamed.

Rowland rushed over to him. “John? Are you alright?” He helped the deputy back to his feet.

“Yeah,” the man said. “Just twisted my ankle. I’m okay.”

“Can you walk on it?” Rowland asked.

Deputy John put some weight on it. He winced in pain but eventually took a few ginger steps. “Yeah. I’m gonna feel this in the morning, but I can keep going.”

“You sure?” Rowland asked.

John looked at the pieces of the rope ladder on the ground. “I’m hoping we find another way out of here that doesn’t involve climbing back up this hole.”

“Hey! Look here,” Hardlee said, moving across the tunnel to a pile of old backpacks and gear along the wall. “It’s a lantern.”

Hardlee picked the lantern up from the ground and held it by the handle out in front of him. “It looks like there’s still some fuel in it. Do you think it’s really old?”

Rowland walked over and examined it. The kid was right, it looked like it

had plenty of fuel. It also looked fairly modern.

"I don't think that's an antique," Rowland said. "More like someone else was down here looking around fairly recently."

"But why would they leave their lantern?" Hardlee asked.

"Good question, kid," Rowland said, not wanting to say what he thought the answers may actually be. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter, igniting the wick to the lantern, still in Hardlee's hands.

"Now, you got a light too," he said to Hardlee. "Don't drop it. We don't need a fire down here."

"Yes, sir. I won't," Hardlee said, holding the lantern away from his body.

"Let's head this way," Rowland said, picking a direction. "It looks like it leads back up. Aza? Where are you?"

"Right behind you, dad," she said, falling into place.

"Oh, no shit!" JayBird yelled, pointing at something on the other side of shaft. "Hardlee, shine your light that way again."

Rowland spun around and pointed his own light in the direction JayBird was pointing. He searched around for a few seconds before seeing what was causing the boy so much alarm.

Leaning against the wall was a full human skeleton, picked clean down to the bone. It was something like you'd see in a movie. Rowland walked over to it to get a closer look. Deputy John was right behind him at his shoulder.

"What do you make of that?" Rowland asked.

"I'd say it's been down here a long time," Deputy John said. "A real, real long time."

"Come on," Rowland said. "Let's keep moving."

They walked farther into the shaft in silence. Rowland knew there was no way he was getting John back up through that opening without a ladder. His only hope of getting them out of there was finding a different way, so up was his best option. If they got back to the surface, he'd call in for an emergency search team and have the mines flooded with volunteers in an hour. He thought

it was the best chance they had of finding the boy.

They turned a corner in the tunnel and came up to two corridors, each branching off in different directions, both appearing to head towards the surface. Rowland stopped at the crossroads, examining each tunnel.

“I don’t know which one to pick,” Rowland said. “Any suggestions?”

“The one with the express lane,” Deputy John added.

“Any more of that green goop on either of them?” Hardlee asked.

That wasn’t a bad suggestion. He looked around the ground and walls, but he didn’t see any. Maybe the Hardlee kid wasn’t so bad after all.

A voice called out from one of the passages.

“Bad Bird!”

“Dewey,” Jay screamed and ran up to the split in the passage. “Which one did it come from?” he frantically asked.

“I couldn’t tell,” Rowland said. “There’s too much echo down here.”

“We gotta do something,” JayBird pleaded. “You heard him. He needs us.”

He was right. They had to do something if the boy was so close they could hear him. They may never get that chance again, and he couldn’t live with himself if they didn’t at least try. He was angry he had to make these choices with his daughter in the middle of it.

“John, you take Hardlee and JayBird and go that way,” he said pointing to the passage on the left. “Aza and I’ll go the other way. That way we both have lights and we both have a gun. Got it?”

Deputy John walked up to the passage and waited for the boys.

“We got this side,” he said, pulling his gun from his holster.

“Stay close to one another,” Rowland said, watching them walk away. “If you find anything, get me on the walkie talkie. We should be able to hear each other if we’re close enough.”

“Got it,” John said, leading the boys into the dark.

“I hate this,” Rowland snarled, looking over at Aza. “And you don’t leave my side. Not even an inch!” He pulled his own weapon from his side holster.

“I won’t,” she said. “I promise.”

Aza grabbed the back of his duty belt, and they started down the side tunnel together. They needed to find that boy and get the hell out of that place, but something told Rowland they weren’t done with surprises just yet, and he fucking hated surprises.

NEVER HOME CAN YOU GO

“I’m sorry, baby,” Rowland said, shining his flashlight down the passage with Aza still behind him. “You should not be in the mess. It’s my fault.”

“You didn’t tell me to come down here,” Aza replied. “Actually, I guess, you pretty much told me to stay away from this place. I was the one who disobeyed you!”

Rowland looked back at his daughter. “I thought you said you didn’t hear that?”

“Oops,” she said. “My bad.”

“Just stay sharp,” he repeated. The last thing he needed was for something to happen to her on account of his own stupidity. “Did you have anything to do with this “Scratch” guy?”

“No,” she said. “That was all Hardlee. He seems fixated on him for some reason.”

“New kid in town. No real ties. Got some family issues,” Rowland said. “Makes the boy a pretty easy mark. Doesn’t surprise me really.” He paused and felt Aza bump into his back. “Hold on, there’s something up ahead.”

The tunnel was thick with cobwebs. Rowland used his flashlight to knock down as many as he could as they went, but there were literally hundreds of webs hanging from the ceiling, between the occasional support beam, and along the ground. But, for as many of them as there were, he didn’t see a single spider.

“Ewww. Ewww. Ewww,” Aza said, as if in response to his thoughts.

She never really did well with spiders. Even when her mother was around, Aza would freak out when they found one in the kitchen or garage. She’d stay out of that room for days until she felt it was finally “clear”. This had to be pretty hard on her. She must really like these boys to go through it.

“What the hell?” Rowland said, flashing the light in front of them.

Along the side of the tunnel someone was kneeling down and facing away from them. He could see their straight blonde hair in his light, and by their size, they definitely didn’t look like a child or that Scratch character. The person was sobbing. Rowland put his hand behind him to stop Aza.

“Is that him?” she asked. “Is it Dewey?”

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “Stay here. Do not move from this spot. Understand?”

“Got it.”

Rowland eased his way closer to the person sobbing. The closer he got, the surer he was it wasn’t Dewey. It sounded like a female crying. It made sense to him there could be other victims down there.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Are you okay?”

He took another step closer. “How’d you get down here? Is anyone with you?”

The woman didn’t respond. She stayed turned from him and continued weeping. Rowland thought there was something familiar about her, but he couldn’t quite place it.

Slowly, he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Ma’am?”

In a flash, the woman jumped up from the ground. She turned and buried her face into his chest, crying even harder.

“Oh, Rowland,” she said, clinging to his shirt. “You found me! I’ve been waiting down here so long.”

“What the Hell? Kara?” he asked, grabbing the female by her shoulders and pushing her back. It wasn’t possible, but he was looking into the face of his ex-wife.

“How in the hell did you get here?” he asked.

She just looked up into his eyes and gave a weak smile.

“It’s me, Rowland. I’m back,” she said. “I’m here to fix what went wrong. I want us to be a family again. I need you in my life.”

“Mom?” Aza cried as she stepped toward them.

Rowland pointed at Aza.

“No,” he yelled, looking back at her. “Stay back, Aza! Something’s not right here.”

Rowland felt Kara’s hand slip up along his neck and the warmth of her palm on his cheek. He turned back to her, looking into those big blue eyes. The same eyes he fell in love with years ago. The same eyes he never thought he’d see again.

“I know I’ve made mistakes,” she said. “I need to make things right for you. That’s why I’m here. We’ll make it good again, just like before. I promise.”

Rowland was frozen, caught in her stare. He couldn’t move. It was like he was paralyzed. She turned her head to the side and raised up on her tiptoes to find his lips with hers. He felt electrified as their lips touched. His arms and neck tingled. He was a dumb school kid all over again. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her closer. He didn’t want the moment to ever end.

Finally, she pulled away from him and smiled. He immediately missed touching her lips to his and tried to draw her in again, but she gently resisted. She ran her hand down the side of his face.

“Rowland, I’ve missed you so much,” she said. “It’s time for us to be together again.”

Her words were like music, delicately floating from her mouth to his ears. Everything she said, each word she spoke, made him happier inside. He felt so alive, like he wasn’t even touching the ground. For the first time in years, it didn’t seem like he was alone in the world. His eyes welled up with tears as a wave of emotion swept over him.

“Kara,” he sobbed. “I love you. I never stopped loving you. Even after...after the...”

“Shhhhh,” she soothed. “That was then. This is now. Our now.”

“Hey,” Aza called out from behind them. “Somebody want to tell me what the hell is going on?”

Kara leaned in again, not for a kiss, but to whisper in his ear. “There’s only one thing keeping us from being happy again, Rowland.”

“What?” he asked. “What is it?” Rowland knew he would do whatever it took for them to be together again. He needed Kara back in his life, more than he’d imagined or thought possible. She would make him complete. His mind was already racing ahead with images of their new life together.

Kara looked over his shoulder towards Aza.

“You need to kill the girl,” she whispered in his ear.

“What?” Rowland asked. He must not have heard her right. There was some kind of misunderstanding. “That’s Aza back there, honey. That’s our daughter.”

“I know,” she said. “She’s what’s keeping us apart. She always has been.”

“I don’t...I don’t understand,” he stammered. “It’s our Azalea.”

“You love me, don’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I do. I’ve missed...”

“Then you need to do this for me. For us,” her voice became sterner and her gentle touch turned into a hold.

Rowland didn’t even realize he was doing it until he saw his arm raising up from his side, his service pistol in his hand. It was like he didn’t have control of his own muscles as his arm pointed the gun towards Aza, who just stood there dumbfounded looking at him like a deer standing in the road watching the coming headlights.

“Dad?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he felt his finger squeezing the trigger.

His hand trembled and the pistol wobbled in his grasp. He knew it was wrong. It was his daughter. She was all the family he had for the last few years. She was an innocent. She was his reality.

“Do it, Rowland,” Kara whispered in his ear from behind. “Let us be together, just you and I. I’ll be everything you want me to be. Wife. Partner. Lover.”

He could feel her hot breath on his neck. The touch of her hand on his body. He needed her back in his life, no matter the cost.

Slowly, he pulled back on the trigger, looking straight into his daughter’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Aza,” he said.

“I love you, dad,” Aza said, staring back at him.

It all happened in a blur. Rowland spun around and buried the butt of the pistol down into his ex-wife’s neck. Her face twisted into a mix of surprise and anger. He swore her eyes flashed from blue to green as she collapsed at his feet. Rowland kicked her in the side to get some distance. He slowly backed away, pointing his pistol at her.

“I don’t know what the hell you are,” he said. “But you’re not my ex-wife.”

Aza came up from behind him and hugged him. He wrapped his arm around his daughter’s shoulders and pulled her close.

“What’s going on, Dad?” she asked. “What is that? It looked like mom! Is she hurt?”

“I know it does,” he said. “Something’s not right here. Just stay behind me.”

Rowland watched Kara’s body twist and convulse on the ground as she twitched and thrust her legs out from under her. The dirt and dust from the passage floor formed a blanket of haze around her as she continued to spasm before coming to a sudden stop. Rowland heard clicking noises coming from the dust cloud.

“Kara?” he asked.

What turned around to face them was not his ex. It was the pale face of a young Asian girl. She was crouched low on the ground. Her bright green eyes

reflected in the beam of his light, curtained by straight black hair hanging down from her shoulders. Her red painted lips formed a smile as she focused on them.

“You should have listened,” she said. “Now you both will die.”

“Just stay where you are,” Rowland ordered, keeping his pistol trained on the girl. “I’ll shoot you. Don’t think I won’t.”

She leaped at them with a speed that surprised Rowland. He didn’t even see her getting ready to jump. It was like she just sprang at them from the ground. Luckily for him, he’d spent a lot of hours on the range preparing to react fast. He rang off a shot, catching her in mid-air. The sound of the gun was deafening in the small underground shaft. His ears felt like they were ready to explode, and his vision blurred for a moment. He heard Aza yell out behind him.

In the seconds it took him to regain his composure, he lost sight of the girl, who had been right in front of him. He looked all around him with no sign of her.

“What the hell?” he asked, barely able to hear his own voice over the ringing in his ears.

Some rocks fell down from above and Rowland gazed up towards the ceiling. There, clinging to the rocks above them was the girl. She was holding her shoulder, which was bleeding green blood. She hissed at him and then crawled into a large crack in the ceiling, vanishing inside the shadows. Rowland watched for a moment to be sure she was gone before he turned to his daughter. She had both hands pressed against her ears and winced in pain.

“Aza,” he called, but she didn’t respond. He moved over and shook her by the arm. “Aza!” he yelled to her and she pulled her hands away from her ears and yelled back to him.

“Dad!” she screamed. “What was that? Where’s mom?”

He pulled her in close and hugged her, thinking back to a minute ago when he had a pistol pointed at her head.

“That was not your mother,” he said, kissing her forehead. “Whatever it was, I think there’s more than one of them. Are you sure that you’re okay?”

“Depends. Do you still feel like shooting me?” she asked, looking up at him and smirking.

“Don’t even go there,” he chuckled.

“I just wanted to mess with you,” she replied with a grin.

“Come on,” he chuckled. “I think we need to find the others and get the Hell out of here. We’re in way over our heads.”

Rowland started back the way they came but felt his daughter tug at his hand. He turned around to see her looking behind them at something farther down the tunnel.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Look over there,” she said, pointing to something on the ground, near where they first saw the woman. “There’s something moving on the ground.”

Rowland moved in front of his daughter and shined his light on the object. It was small, smaller than the female was, and completely covered in webbing that formed some type of cocoon around it. He moved closer and could see something squirming inside.

“Stay behind me,” he said.

“What is it?” Aza asked.

“I don’t know.” Rowland bent down next to the cocoon. It was shaped like a small mummy, wrapped from head to toe. As he got closer to the head, he could hear frantic mumbling coming from the inside the webbing. Reaching into his pocket, Rowland flicked open a pocket knife and carefully cut away from where he thought the mouth should be. Whatever was inside took a huge breath of air.

“Bad bird. Bad bird. Bad bad bird,” whoever was inside repeated.

“Dewey!” Aza yelled and dropped to her knees beside him. “Dad! It’s the boy. It’s Dewey. Help me get him free.”

Rowland used his knife to cut away as much as the webbing as he could without cutting the boy. Aza was ripping at the webs with her bare hands, pulling it away in large stands. Eventually, they freed most of his torso and upper body. Aza looked into Dewey’s face. He was shivering and shaking, but conscious. Rowland continued to work at freeing the boy’s legs.

“Hi, Dewey,” she said with a big smile. “I’m Aza. I’m friends with JayBird.”

At the mention of his brother's name, Dewey focused on her.

"Bird?" he asked. "Where's JayBird?"

Carefully, Rowland and Aza helped him up. He seemed pretty rattled, but other than that, he didn't look actually injured.

"M-m-monster," he said, looking around the shaft.

Aza took Dewey by the hand. They started walking down the tunnel with her leading the way.

"No more monster," she said. "Monster's gone. Let's go find JayBird and Hardlee."

"Ok," Dewey said, letting Aza lead him away. "Cold," he added.

Aza rubbed his shoulders and arms. Rowland was impressed with how well she took charge of the situation.

"It'll be warm where we're going," she said, adding a smile. "Promise."

Rowland looked behind them as they backtracked down the passage, shining his light up ahead. He looked up at the large crack in the ceiling where the girl climbed into and he hoped they'd seen the last of her, but he had his doubts.

"Hey, we need some light here," Aza called over her shoulder.

"Right behind you," Rowland said, drawing his pistol from his holster and keeping it ready at his side.

THE OLD SWITCHEROO

“Did you guys hear something?” Hardlee asked, bringing up the rear of the line formed by Deputy John and then his cousin.

“Yeah,” JayBird answered over his shoulder. “Sounded like some kind of big bang or something.”

“Maybe we should check in with the Sheriff,” Deputy John said, pulling his radio from his belt. He held the walkie talkie up to his face. “Sheriff Thunder? Sheriff? This is John. Can you hear me?”

Hardlee held the lantern up higher, and they all watched the radio for any sign of life. All they got back was silence.

“Sheriff?” the deputy said, trying again. “Do you read me?”

They waited another moment before the deputy put the radio back on his belt.

“So much for the theory of staying close,” he said. “Looks like we’re on our own, boys.”

Hardlee held the lantern out in front of them as they continued into the tunnels. He had been trying to get a better assessment of the situation ever since they split apart from Aza and her dad. JayBird was only focused on finding his brother, and Hardlee understood that. The deputy was there because it was his job to protect people. But for the life of him, Hardlee couldn’t think of one

good reason for him to be down there. He liked being around Aza, but her and her dad could be back on the surface by then for all he knew.

He wasn't a hero. He wasn't the person people turned to when there was a problem. Usually, he was the problem. He was in way over his head, and he was worried they'd never find their way back out of that tunnel.

Coming up to a sharp bend in the passage, he turned the corner and ran right into the back of JayBird.

"Watch it," Hardlee said. "How about a heads up before you stop? JayBird?"

He looked at his cousin, who was staring straight ahead at something in the tunnel. Deputy John was focused on whatever it was. He followed their stares down the passage to the very end of the deputy's light.

Something was crouched on the ground. Hardlee couldn't tell what it was. It looked like it was hovering over something else. It reminded him of a vampire from the old movies him and his mom used to watch before she died. The creature was half-concealed in the shadows, but the gurgling and sucking noises coming from it were unmistakable. It was feeding.

"What do we do?" Hardlee whispered to Deputy John.

"I have no fucking clue, kid," he answered. "I'm not even sure what I'm looking at. I don't think it sees us though. Maybe we can quietly back away?"

"Where's my brother, you shit turd?" JayBird yelled down the passage.

So much for a quiet retreat, Hardlee thought.

The creature was as startled by them as they were by it. Its head snapped up as it looked at them and hissed. Blood dripped down from its mouth and chin. Hardlee looked into the creature's face, having a hard time finding its eyes. The vampire part seemed to be holding up pretty well.

"Don't move," Deputy John yelled, pointing his gun. "I'll shoot!"

"Kill it," JayBird yelled. "It's got Dewey!"

The creature took a step in their direction and Deputy John fired off a shot. Hardlee's world immediately turned upside down. The entire passage shook around him as he grabbed for his ears with his hands. His vision blurred, and he went down to one knee. He struggled to focus on the shaft ahead of them.

The thing screeched at them and then turned and ran into the shadows deeper into the tunnel.

Satisfied it wasn't coming at them, Hardlee glanced over at JayBird, who was even closer to Deputy John when he fired. JayBird was turned away with his back to Hardlee, covering both ears, but stumbling forward, towards the body still on the ground. Hardlee felt Deputy John's hand on his shoulder.

"You alright, son?" he asked.

"Yeah," Hardlee yelled back. "That was just really loud."

The deputy nodded down in agreement before looking over at JayBird.

"Son? You okay," he yelled. "Hey! Stay away from that! Don't get any closer!"

JayBird either didn't hear, or just didn't care, as he stumbled toward the body and dropped down next to it. He looked and just froze there, not moving and not making a sound.

"What is it?" Hardlee said as he stumble ran up next to him.

What was there didn't look human. It looked like one of those dried and shriveled up mummies Hardlee saw at the museum back on a school field trip to Washington, D.C. The face was sunken in like someone just sucked all the life right from it. The eyes were two hollow sockets staring back up at him. The whole body was covered in cobwebs and looked like it had been there a hundred years. He looked over at JayBird.

"Jay?" Hardlee asked. "Is it Dewey?"

JayBird didn't take his eyes off the drained corpse.

"Is it him?" Hardlee repeated.

Deputy John came up behind them and stood, peering down over them both.

"You said your brother was younger than you," he said. "That's not him, son."

JayBird looked up at the deputy. "You sure?"

“Positive,” Deputy John said, resting his hand on JayBird’s shoulder.

“I’ve seen enough dead bodies to tell you that was an adult male.”

Even with his ears still pounding, Hardlee heard the audible sigh of relief his cousin gave.

“So, who is it then?” JayBird asked.

“If I had to guess from his size and those keys he’s clutching,” Deputy John said, pointing to the corpse’s hand.

Hardlee saw the withered fingers wrapped around a set of keys and a small gold and blue medallion hanging from the ring.

“That looks like our missing guy from back at the Legion,” he said. “It looks like he’s been dead a lot longer than a day though.”

Deputy John looked down the tunnel to where the creature had retreated.

“Yeah. I think we’ve had enough for one day,” he pulled JayBird up by the back of his collar. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

“Not without my brother,” JayBird yelled, pulling free of the deputy’s grip. He grabbed Hardlee’s lantern from his hand and ran down the passage in the same direction the creature had just went.

“Dammit,” the deputy snapped. He looked over at Hardlee. “Is your cousin always this much of an asshole?”

“Pretty much,” Hardlee answered with a shrug and started walking the same direction JayBird went. “But he’s all the family I got.”

“Fair enough,” Deputy John said, and fell in behind Hardlee, shining his light out in front of them.

They walked deeper down into the corridor. What little warmth Hardlee’s lantern provided, he immediately missed it, but not enough that he’d volunteer to go first in line. The cold soaked through his clothes and into his skin. He hadn’t dressed with deep cave exploration in mind that morning. He looked ahead for any traces of light from JayBird’s lantern, but he couldn’t see any.

“Do you think he’s ok?” Hardlee didn’t want to put his concerns into words, but it was the only thing on his mind.

The deputy had one hand on his light and the other wrapped around his pistol, pointing both out in front of him. "I'm sure he's fine. That thing got spooked. It's not coming back."

"Oh, Shit!" JayBird called out from somewhere ahead of them.

"JayBird!" Hardlee screamed and ran out ahead of the deputy.

"Wait," the deputy called out, but Hardlee was already a dozen steps ahead of him. "Doesn't anyone in your family know how to listen?"

Hardlee rounded the next bend and realized the light from the deputy's flashlight ended with it. He was moving pretty much in total darkness. There could be anything right in front of him, and he wouldn't know it until it was too late. Not one of his best thought out plans. He thrust both arms out in front of him trying to feel his way forward.

"JayBird," he called out, immediately regretting that decision. If there was something out there, he just told it he was there.

Finally, his hand touched the wall to the cavern. It wasn't much, but at least he gave him some kind of bearing as he crept forward. He glanced behind him, hoping to see the deputy's light coming up from the rear, but it was just more blackness.

It felt like the walls were closing in around him, and he was finding it harder and harder to breath as he inched his way down the passage. He couldn't tell by just touching the wall, if he was going straight or turning or going up or down. It seemed like all he was doing was walking closer and closer towards something bad. He couldn't stop moving forward. It was like something was drawing him to it. Whatever was waiting for him was watching him with eyes better suited for the lack of light than his.

He was walking towards the end of something. He could feel it.

A dim light flickered somewhere ahead of him. Giving him a little hope, Hardlee stepped up his pace, still being careful to find his footing. The light grew bigger and brighter, but he was still afraid to speak until he could make out more details. As he got closer, he saw JayBird kneeling over someone on the ground. The lantern was on the ground next to him.

"JayBird," Hardlee finally called out.

His cousin turned to him with a smile. "You'll never guess who I found."

With the extra light, Hardlee quickly made his way over to his cousin and looked down at the small body JayBird was holding in his arms.

“Dewey?” he asked excitedly.

Hardlee was surprised when he saw it wasn’t his younger cousin. It was a small girl, even younger than Dewey. He didn’t recognize her, but JayBird seemed to. His cousin was working at ripping away the webbing which was still covering her.

“Who is it?” Hardlee asked.

JayBird looked over his shoulder as he worked on freeing the girl.

“This is Betsy Anne,” he said, smiling at her. “She went missing night before you came to town. Everyone thought she was with her daddy.”

“D-d-daddy,” Betsy Anne weakly said, her head drooping to the side.

“She’s weak,” JayBird said. “But I think she’ll be okay if we get her to a doctor.”

“How are we going to do that, JayBird?” Hardlee asked, getting frustrated with his cousin’s hard headed ways. “We’re like a mile underground. We lost the deputy. We have no idea how to get out of here. How are we doing any of that?”

JayBird’s brow furrowed and it looked like he was really considering each of the points Hardlee put forth to debate. He looked down at the little girl in his arms and then back up at Hardlee.

“Don’t have a damn clue, cousin,” he said. “But I’m sure gonna try.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Hardlee said. “I feel so much better now.”

A voice called out to them from the shadows beyond the lantern’s reach.

“Maybe I can be of some help,” it said.

The voice sounded weak and brittle, but definitely male. Hardlee knew he had heard it somewhere before.

Mister Scratch stepped into the lantern light and smiled at them.

SHANTY RED

“Looks like you two could use a friend.”

FRIEND TO THE END

“You’re hurt,” Hardlee said, pointing to Scratch’s shoulder, which was bleeding and soaking through his jacket.

Scratch looked over at his injury.

“That’s because you shot me, Hardlee-boy,” Scratch whimpered. “I thought we were friends.”

“I didn’t shoot you,” Hardlee snapped back. “The Sheriff did, because you were messing around with our feelings.”

“I’m guessing that’s the Scratch guy you were talking about,” JayBird said, coming up next to Hardlee. He still had little Betsy Anne in his arms. “Dude gives off a total creep vibe.”

“Yeah, that’s him,” Hardlee confirmed. “And we are definitely not friends!”

Mister Scratch stepped towards them, and both boys instinctively stepped back.

“Hardlee, you hurt my feelings,” the man said. “I was only trying to help you. Now, I’m hurt, and I’m weak – so, so, weak.”

“Where’s my little brother, shit stain?” JayBird yelled at him. “What did you do with him?”

“Who is that?” Mister Scratch asked as a moment of realization came over his face. “Oh, the little little one. Bad bird, right? He’s yours?”

“He’s my brother!” JayBird snarled back at him. Hardlee could feel JayBird’s body tensing next to him.

“JayBird,” Hardlee pleaded. “This guy is serious business. We need to think this through.”

“The one by the tower,” Scratch said, tapping his finger to chin. “I remember him. Yes. We had a wonderful time, him and I. We took a walk in the woods. I showed him my home. We told each other secrets. He was...delicious.”

Before Hardlee could react, JayBird dropped Betsy Anne to the ground and charged at Scratch with both fists in the air. Hardlee reached for his cousin, but he was already half way across the passage.

“I’ll kill you,” JayBird screamed.

Scratch backhanded him, and JayBird went flying across the tunnel. He hit the ground hard and tumbled head over feet a couple times before finally coming to a stop. Hardlee waited for him to spring back up, but he wasn’t moving.

“JayBird!” he said, rushing over to him.

There was blood on his face from a fresh cut on his forehead. His neck and head were limp and hanging to the side. Hardlee shook him by the shoulders, but he was out cold.

“Come on,” Hardlee yelled into his face. “Get up!”

Scratch cackled with delight behind them.

“He’s not the one I want anyway, Hardlee-boy,” he hissed. “You are the prize. I’ve come to collect you before I go back to sleep.”

Hardlee groped around in the dirt for a weapon, a stick, anything. His fingers wrapped around a large rock. It would have to do.

Spinning around, he threw the rock towards Scratch with everything he could muster. He watched the stone streak across the cavern and stop about a foot away from Scratch’s head. It just floated in front of the man’s face. Scratch tilted his head to the side to look at Hardlee.

“I think we’ve had enough of the games, Hardlee-boy,” he said.

It was then Hardlee noticed Scratch's feet weren't touching the ground. He was floating a foot off the floor. The dirt and dust in the tunnel looked like a fog all around Scratch in the flickering light of the lantern. He raised his arms up from his sides.

"Come to me, boy," he said.

At first Hardlee thought it must be an earthquake because the ground seemed to shiver and shake under him. He felt like he was sliding towards Scratch, pulled by gravity itself. Hardlee kicked his heels in the dirt of the cavern floor, but he continued to be pulled forward.

"What the hell is happening?" Hardlee screamed.

"I'm hungry, Hardlee," Scratch said. "You and your fool friends have cost me enough already. I didn't ask for all this damn rain. It ruined my stock. I'm going to enjoy drinking you dry though."

Hardlee twisted and turned, looking for anything to grab on to, to stop being pulled towards Scratch. Looking down, he saw JayBird still out cold below him. He reached for his cousin but he drifted away from him, up towards the ceiling, like a balloon. Hardlee spun back around to realize he was floating too. He was completely off the ground and helpless, being pulled towards Scratch's waiting arms.

He saw the lantern directly below him and twisted and kicked at it with his foot. He caught just the top of the lantern, toppling it over to its side.

"Was that really necessary?" Scratch asked him.

"Stop," Hardlee screamed, a few feet away from Scratch's grasp. He twisted toward the man, kicking his legs out in front of him and swinging both arms, like he was trying to swim in the air.

Hardlee watched Scratch's face, a black void filled with dark circles and jagged fangs as he closed in the final few feet. He was about to look away, not wanting that twisted visage to be the last thing he saw, when instead he saw a silver pistol come out of the shadows near Scratch's head.

"Let go of the boy, asshole," Deputy John said, coming into view from behind him. "I'll blow your head clean off. Don't think I won't."

Scratch didn't turn around to face the deputy. He just kept smiling. Hardlee felt the force pulling him forward suddenly stop. He hovered there in mid-air,

helpless as Scratch lowered himself to the ground and placed his hands in the air.

“I don’t want any trouble, Deputy,” he said. “Just tell me what you would like for me to do. I’ll be a good boy. Promise.”

“Keep both hands where I can see them, you sick fuck,” Deputy John said, inching his weapon closer to Scratch’s face.

“Of course,” Scratch said.

“And put the boy down,” the deputy added.

“Ahhhh,” Scratch said, almost jokingly. “That would be the problem then. I already have plans for this one. I’m afraid it’s too late to change them.”

Deputy John thumbed back the hammer on his pistol.

“I’m not messing around,” he shouted.

“Neither am I,” Scratch said.

Hardlee watched Deputy John’s face twist from a look of confusion to one of pure pain and then absolute horror as a giant black talon exploded out from the front of his chest. It retracted almost as fast as it appeared, leaving behind a large hole in his torso. He collapsed instantly.

Hardlee felt the deputy’s blood splatter against his face. He jerked around and grabbed for the wall to get away. He reached into his pockets, searching for anything that could help him. He was going to die, there in the dark, a mile underground, and no one would even care. His mother was dead. His father was out of his life, and the only people who would take him in would probably just chalk him up as a runaway. In a year, he’d be all but forgotten by everyone.

Mister Scratch reached up to Hardlee’s face with one finger and wiped some of the deputy’s blood from it, before licking his finger clean.

“Between the four of you, I’ll be as good as new in no time,” Scratch said. “Let’s finish this.”

“You can’t do this,” Hardlee pleaded. “It’s not right.”

“I’m above morality. Sometimes the world isn’t right, child,” Scratch said with an evil grin. “Some are born the hunters, and some the prey.”

Scratch rose again from the ground and pulled Hardlee in close. With one hand, he bent Hardlee's neck to the side. Scratch's over-sized hat fell to his feet and Hardlee watched his features twist and morph as multiple eyes popped out all across his face. His lower jaw cracked and broke free from the upper jaw, dropping down to his chest and allowing two rows of fangs to appear. Six long, hairy appendages sprouted from his back, each ending in a long black talon. Hardlee realized the horror Scratch was.

His mouth inched closer to Hardlee's neck as he hissed at the boy. "Be still, child."

Using whatever fight he had left, Hardlee brought his dad's pocketknife up from his side and buried it as deep as he could into Scratch's head.

"Let me go!" he shouted.

Scratch reeled away, clutching at the side of his head and bellowed in pain.

"You little, insignificant gnat," he screamed.

Hardlee fell to the ground, and as soon as he felt his feet hit the dirt, he was pushing away from the man, trying to put some distance between them. Turning over to his stomach, he clawed his way back across the cavern towards JayBird and the girl. The flames from the tipped over lantern was all he had to navigate by, so he headed directly for it. Some of the fuel from the lantern had leaked out and was burning on the ground.

He was inches away from the lantern when one of Scratch's talons ripped into the back of his leg. Hardlee screamed out, having never felt a pain like it before in his life. He felt like he was going to pass out.

"You will watch me drain the life from all your little friends before I finally and slowly drain it from you," Scratch seethed.

Hardlee turned around to come face to face with the creature and found himself staring into the face of his mother instead, morphed onto the head of the spider-beast. The grotesque figure inched closer to him.

"It's your fault I'm dead, you know?" She snarled. "If it wasn't for you and your constant whining, I'd still be alive."

"That's not true," Hardlee shouted back at her.

"You've been a burden on your father and I ever since you were born," she

hissed.

“Stop it!” He screamed, turning away.

“Listen to your mother, boy,” the voice said, and Hardlee immediately recognized it as his father’s.

He turned back around to see his dad’s face resting on the creature’s body.

“You’ve been a disappointment to us for as long as I can remember,” he said. “You’d be better off dead.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Hardlee yelled back at his father.

“Oh, I know everything about you, Hardlee,” he said. “I know no one wants you. Your own family left you. This new family can barely stand you. Your cousin thinks you’re pathetic.”

“You’re pathetic,” Hardlee cried. “Nobody told you to steal anything. I didn’t put you in jail!”

“Just let go, Hardlee,” his father said. “It’ll all be over in a minute.”

Hardlee felt himself being dragged towards the creature. He clawed at the ground in front of him, but Scratch was too strong. In a last lunge, Hardlee stretched out as far as he could and his fingers wrapped around the handle of the lantern.

Spinning, Hardlee threw the lantern at Scratch, who had returned to his monstrous spider face, more creature than man, hovering in front of him on six spider-like legs. The lantern hit Scratch square in the chest and exploded into flames, engulfing the man-spider in seconds. The creature stumbled backwards and rolled in the dirt, trying to extinguish the flames.

“Noooo,” it screamed. “Hardlee, help me, please!” It begged. “We’re friends. Remember?”

Hardlee watched as the creature morphed while engulfed in the flames, turning from the spider-monster into a small woman with pretty green eyes, who reached towards him.

“Hardlee, help me,” she screamed. “I love you.”

She transformed again, this time into Mrs. Perkins from back in the trailer.

“You help me out now, child,” she pleaded, as the flames washed over her and she changed again.

“Rowland,” the new figure called out. “Help me, my love!”

The creature morphed one last time, back into its spider form, before finally succumbing to the fire and falling motionless to the ground with a thud. The smell of burning flesh and hair made Hardlee nauseous, and he had to cover his nose and mouth with his shirt. Using the wall of the cavern, he pulled himself to his feet and looked over at JayBird and the girl.

He stumbled over to his cousin, who began to stir, coughing from the smoke filling the corridor.

“What the hell happened?” JayBird asked.

Hardlee pointed over at the still burning corpse of the jorogumo. “That.”

“Fuck,” Jaybird said, staring at the burning mess. “You did that?”

“Pretty much,” Hardlee said. “Used this.” He said, showing JayBird his father’s pocketknife.

JayBird looked down at the blade, covered in green goo, and then smiled at Hardlee. “I knew I liked you.” JayBird looked around the cavern, remembering why they were there. “But now what do we do?”

“Bad Bird!” Dewey yelled from the other side of the corridor, running out of the shadows and straight into JayBird’s arm.

“Dewey!” he yelled, hugging the boy tight. “But how?”

“Over here, bird boy,” Aza said, walking into the corridor with her dad.

They both looked over at the burning creature on the ground. Her dad instinctively pulled her behind him.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked, pointing his gun at it.

“That’s what’s been killing people around here for the last hundred years or so,” Hardlee said. “I’m pretty sure it’s toast.”

Aza rushed up next to Hardlee while her dad got a better look at the roasted carcass of the creature.

“You did that?” she asked. “By yourself?”

“We all did,” Hardlee said, looking over at JayBird and Dewey, still holding each other. “Family sticks together. Right?”

“Where’s Deputy John?” Aza’s dad asked, looking at Hardlee.

Hardlee pointed to the dead deputy lying on the ground in the shadows.

“He tried to save me,” Hardlee said. “But it got him.”

“Damn it,” the sheriff said, looking down at him. “I think it’s time we got out of here.”

“But the ladder broke,” Hardlee said. “How are we getting back up to the surface?”

“We found another way out,” Aza said, taking him by the hand. “Come on.”

“Oh, wait,” Hardlee said, pointing over to the corner. “We found someone else down here.”

Aza’s dad pointed his flashlight in the corner and then rushed over next to Betsy Anne. He put his fingers up to her neck.

“Sonofabitch,” he said. “She’s got a pulse. You boys saved her. Nice job.” He scooped her up in his arms and carried her over to them. “I know someone who’s going to be happy to see her.”

Aza smiled and pulled at Hardlee’s arm. “A double hero. Don’t get a big head about it or nothing.”

As they exited the passage, Hardlee took a last look at the burning corpse of Mister Scratch, or whoever or whatever it actually was.

“I won’t. Don’t worry.”

TELL THEM WHAT THEY'VE WON, JOHNNIE!

Hardlee never realized how great fresh air could actually taste. He took in another deep breath and held it, looking around at the small army of police officers, firemen, and paramedics who had set up in a parking lot near the tunnel's entrance.

JayBird and Dewey were sitting on the back of a nearby ambulance. JayBird's arms were flying again, as he told the story of how he single-handedly took out the spider monster in the tunnels. Every time he mentioned the creature, it seemed to get bigger. Dewey's eyes were as large as quarters watching his brother go.

There's a saying out there, Hardlee heard his mom use it a bunch of times - "You can't pick your relatives." He supposed that was true, especially after everything he just went through, but all things considered he did pretty well for himself with the ones he found. He had a feeling he and JayBird would pretty much become as close as brothers, and that's something he'd wanted his whole life, and Dewey was about as great of a little brother as you could ask for.

Ma Harker was a sweet and kind woman, and JayBird's dad seemed pretty gruff on the outside, but Hardlee figured there was more to him than that. Then there was Gram Gertie, someone who just told it like it was and could care less about popular opinion. He chuckled to himself trying to guess what she would say about this whole mess. And she was right, there really was evil down below them. The sheriff said the tunnels and passages leading off from the main entrance in the canal stretched for miles under them, running all the way to town and even up into the hills.

He looked over at Aza and her dad, who was still yelling at her in between hugs and tears. She may be grounded for the next month, or year, or decade, but Hardlee had a feeling they'd find a way to hang out again soon enough. She snuck a look Hardlee's way and they exchanged quick grins. Yeah, he definitely was going to see her again as soon as possible.

"Everything looks good," the paramedic beside him said. "You were pretty lucky down there, and brave too, from what I hear."

"Thanks," Hardlee said, jumping down from the back of the ambulance. "I don't want to go through that again any time soon. It was pretty intense."

"Intense?" the paramedic repeated. "From what Sheriff Thunder said, you pretty much saved this entire town from that...thing down there. He said you were a hero."

"Really?" Hardlee said. "Hero." He liked the way that sounded. Maybe he wouldn't have a lifetime ban from seeing Aza after all. Maybe that place and the people who lived there would become the one thing he wanted most – a home. Hardlee tried to fight back a smile. He looked over at a group of men putting on protective gear and respirators near the tunnel entrance. Several of them had rifles.

"What are those guys doing?" he asked.

"They're going in to recover the remains," the paramedic said, putting away some equipment. "They already called some folks from the university, who want to examine it. What did you say it was called?"

"A jorogumo," Hardlee answered, having a flashback of the creature dangling him in the air in front of its dozens of hungry eyes. He shivered as he watched the group enter into the tunnel. "I hope they know what they're doing."

"You said it was dead, burned to a crisp, right?" the paramedic asked.

"Yeah. Yeah. It's toast," Hardlee said. "That's the last anyone has seen of Mister Scratch."

The cavern was still filled with smoke as the carcass of the jorogumo lie still on the ground. The only light in the space was the residual flames from the still smoldering lantern nearby. The space was quiet and still.

Something under the joro's body began to quiver and shake, pulsating under its skin near the torso. The shaking grew stronger and more violent as the body shifted on top of the dirt passage.

Suddenly, the skin burst open as hundreds of tiny spiders scattered out from the host body. The baby spiders poured over the body and quickly began to devour what was left of the creature. Bite by tiny bite, the young joros quickly consumed its host, from charred flesh to cartilage and finally bone, leaving nothing to remain.

A light broke through the darkness from the far end of the tunnel. The tiny spiders scattered across the cavern, finding their own cracks and small spaces to flee into, seeking safety in the dark corners of the tunnel. As the last of the tiny creatures found their new home, a voice called out.

"He said it should be just up ahead."

The group of men Hardlee had watched on the surface had found their way into the same cavern where the joro's body had just occupied. A group of them had their rifles to their shoulders, while the others scanned the area with their lights and lanterns. They searched all over the cavern, in every corner, finding nothing.

"There's nothing here," one of the men finally said.

"This is where they said it would be," another man added, pointing to the ground. "Look, there's the lantern, just like the boy said."

"I don't know what to tell you, Roy," the man said. "I don't see no giant spider monster, do you?"

"I guess we'll have to go back up to the surface and tell the Sheriff," Roy answered, stripping off his helmet and gloves, before leaning against one of the walls. "It's hot as hell down here anyway."

"He's not going to like hearing this," another man said. "Do you think it's still alive? What if it escaped?"

"Well, then he can come back down here and look for it his damn self," Roy said. "Ow! What the hell was that?"

He pulled his hand away from the cavern wall and shined his light on it. There were two tiny puncture marks in his skin.

“What is that?” he asked.

One of the other men looked over his shoulder. “Looks like something bit you. Watch out!” He yelled and shoved Roy to the side, stomping on something on the ground.

He pulled back his boot to reveal a crushed baby Joro.

“What was it?” Roy asked.

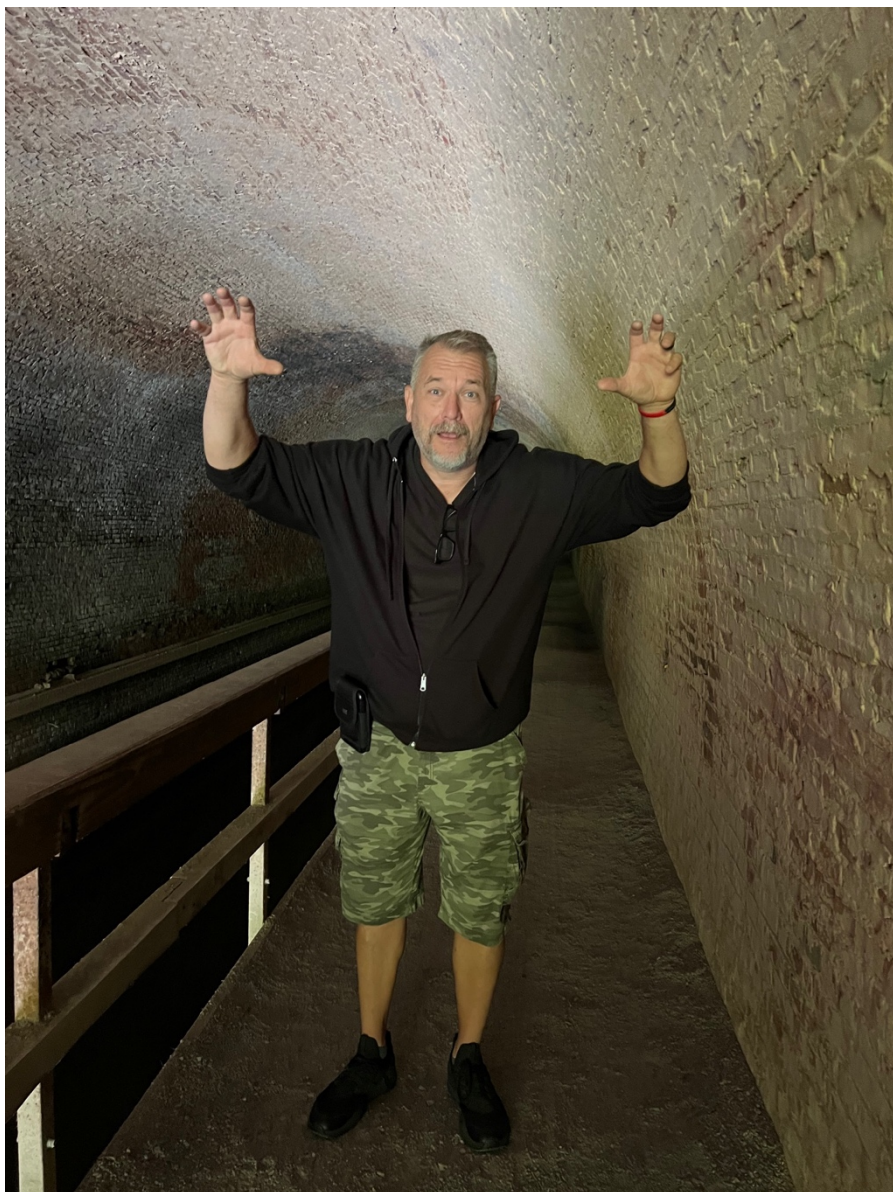
“Nothing. Just a spider.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.A. Check is a multi-genre author and comic book writer born and writing out of Southwestern Pennsylvania. He earned his degree in English from Penn State University. His work includes both original and globally recognized licensed properties to include *Night of the Living Dead*, *Return of the Living Dead*, *Fright Night*, *Willy's Wonderland*, *Silent Night Deadly Night*, *Hatchet*, *Zorro*, *Stargate Atlantis*, *The Three Stooges*, *Pink Panther*, *Casper*, and many others. His original novels include *Welcome to GreenGrass*, *Legend Gary*, *Maxx Fragg*, and *Monkey Farm*, and also the original comic book series *Volcanosaurus*, *Legend Fell*, *Cartoon Puppet Horror Theater*, *The Grunch*, and *New Year's Prey*.







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