



PASSOVER

APHRODITE ROBERT P.
ANAGNOST & ARTHUR

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by Aphrodite Anagnost & Robert P. Arthur

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VIRGINIA BEACH
CAPE CHARLES



Sheriff Phil Wise took a light drag, flicked his cigarette, and with a heavy boot heel ground it out on the gray, painted boards of the front porch at 23 Burnt Chestnut Road. His Surefire flashlight flickered. Mist descended, enveloping the gables and fretwork of a tiny village nestled between the ocean and the Chesapeake Bay—a remote neck hidden on the Delmarva Peninsula. The sheriff inhaled again and frowned. Burnt carbon must have coalesced over some fire pit and migrated down the road, picking up dew from sodden oaks and maples.

Wise's deputy, John Crockett, unbuttoned his yellow rain slicker and stepped onto the porch, mumbling curses as he bumped one knee on a cast-iron rendering pot. He glanced over his shoulder as though something were following. He reached into the coat and pulled out a dog-eared copy of the Dalai Lama's *Little Book of Wisdom*. He patted it, then returned the slim volume to his pocket.

"Good read?" said Wise.

"Helps turn off the internal monologue." The deputy pointed to his head.

The sheriff insisted on going back to the houses of both H.V. Ewell and Revel Petty every few days to re-examine the evidence. Ewell's home was the first scene of a series of possibly serial murders that had resulted in an exodus from Zebulon,

Virginia's community of three-hundred souls. After nine visits, he still feared he'd missed some crucial clue.

"Want me to go in?" said Crockett, sounding ready to recant as soon as the offer had passed his lips.

The 1930s clapboard foursquare was mounted on a dozen or so new brick pillars. Like other farm houses in Zebulon, it rose two stories and had four sash windows upstairs, a clear transom above the entry, and two groups of three windows on the ground floor. The heavy green front door had a huge frosted glass oval. The porch was cluttered by bicycle parts, tires, chains, and assorted hand tools. A small sign screwed into the wall beside the front door read *Ewell's Bicycle and Small Engine Repair*.

"Guess you oughta come. Take a look around. It's your post, Johnny." The sheriff unclipped a saucer-sized ring of keys from his belt.

"Reckon I oughta keep watch out here." Crockett unzipped his jacket, then zipped it up again.

"Suit yourself," said the sheriff, sorting through the keys.

Crockett studied his own long fingers as if they belonged on someone else. "Strangest spring ever. Must be that global warmin'. Wouldn't be surprised if we saw snow on Easter."

Wise gazed at the copper moon, almost full, but blurred by moisture and Magnolia leaves drooping under dew. It was like the tropical moon of a rainforest.

"Be a big fat one tonight," Crockett said. When Wise threw him a puzzled look, he added, "Full moon with a face like a clock in a hall."

"Don't tell me about fat moons," said the sheriff.

Using an embroidered handkerchief, Wise wiped away the sweat that had popped out on his forehead, then slipped the carefully folded cloth in his back pocket. No sooner had he tucked it in, than moisture beaded his brow again. His eyebrows felt like icy caterpillars.

He pulled down the crime-scene tape that sealed the door. "Post out here to cover my behind. I'll go on in and ruminate about the parlor some more."

A grackle dove out of the night sky onto the porch. The deputy flipped his hat to shoo it away. "Hsst! Get outta here, you vicious little bastard."

“You’ll stay in fine fettle right here,” said the sheriff. “Probably till morning anyway.” The deputy frowned. “That’s some funny joke, Sheriff.”

“Yet you ain’t laughing, Crockett.” Wise stared down at his chubby hand, illuminated by the Surefire as he turned the key in the lock. As was his habit, he fortified himself to enter the crime scene by muttering under his breath, “Sweet Jesus, here I come.”

He crossed the threshold and slapped at the wall until he found the light switch. He turned his flashlight off and slid it back into his belt, then checked for the Glock 22 in his holster. The fireplace was empty but the air still smelled of burnt cedar. Everything looked the same as it looked on the night of the first murder. He didn’t know why he felt drawn toward the site again and again. Or what he might be looking for. In most cases, crime scenes suggested obvious events, especially when there’d been a violent death. Possibilities seemed endless. But in this case all explanations seemed stranger than the crime scene itself.

He crossed to his usual seat, a worn velvet wingback near the door, and sat. The chair exhaled as he settled on its cushion. It let out a held breath.

Each piece of furniture had been pulled away from the walls as if by enormous magnets, then apparently levitated and set down again at random. No scuffs, no drag marks on the furniture, walls, or floor. No signs of damage whatsoever. The armoire that held the television had turned its back on the sofa that had shifted its legs off the carpet that had been rolled up like a fat wool cigar. The sofa now faced the wall. The end tables were stacked like children’s blocks, and the framed pictures all hung catawampus. A planter’s desk had been laid flat on its back, like a corpse, doors closed tight in its frames, glass unbroken. The two floor lamps—unplugged, stripped of shades—had migrated to the kitchen. In the midst of all this jumbled furniture a grandfather clock stood tall and straight like a cop directing traffic. It was as if the furnishings, all blind, had walked to random places and parked themselves—illegally.

The sheriff studied the hole in the middle of the pine floor. The three-foot opening had penetrated even the sub floor, leaving an eerie portal to the crawl space below. The edges were

smooth, burnished, and round, as if the object that had broken through had whittled, sanded, and charred them. No other sign of damage to the house, no scatterings of books, or papers, or clothes. Only ash stains and blotches of blood spread like purple bruises on the walls. And there had been no robbery.

Near his feet lay a photograph of H.V. Ewell and his sister and parents, standing in their Sunday best in a black and white row framed by gold. Something about the picture itself stirred in the edges of his mind. *Why?* He didn't know.

Two full moons past, the house had been lit like a Jack-O-Lantern from within, grinning brilliantly in the dark. Finally, Mathew Harper, the neighborhood pharmacist, had called the sheriff by cell phone to report, "Mr. Ewell left his front door and all the windows open. The place was lit up like someone was having a Halloween party. Didn't look right," Harper had said, "So I went on in."

The pharmacist had found Ewell skewered by the shaft of the stop sign from a nearby intersection. The body was dangling two feet below the cast-iron chandelier made by the blacksmith who'd built the house in 1935. Loops of bicycle chain coiled like a segmented snake around the head of the stop sign and wrapped the outstretched arms of the chandelier.

The victim had been kababbed through the lower back and out the belly like a spear-gunned grouper. He'd drooped there, head and limbs hanging. Strings of bowel draped with omental fat had escaped the torn abdomen, stomach spilling fragments of lamb chops, cabbage, and un-chewed peas. Blood had splattered the floor beneath him. Judging by the semicircular pattern, the medical examiner, Dr. Rachel Shelton, had deducted that before H.V. Ewell died, his aorta had been punctured. Swinging in a slow arc, Ewell's body had sprayed the wall like a hose.

When Wise finally left the house again, the first touches of dawn were patrolling, probing the closed, locked windows. Zebulon, as usual this early, lay quiet. The town's painted Victorians, some predating the Civil War, flaunted sweeping gingerbread-trimmed porches in their drowsy, wet sleep.

Wise glanced at his watch and walked into the front yard, nodding as he passed his deputy. Still as marble, Crockett now stood under a bare crape myrtle, cradling his rifle under one

arm. He opened his book. Pink dawn illuminated the pages as he read, moving his lips.

“Don’t go droppin’ things, Johnny,” said the sheriff. “You look like a gold miner’s pack donkey.”

“Sheriff Wise,” Crocket said. “Who do you think it is we’re after?”

“Hell if I know. Somethin’ that kills people, Johnny.” The sheriff blew into the early morning air to see whether it was cold enough to condense his breath. It wasn’t...yet. “You wait right here, Deputy. If it shows up while I’m gone, shoot it. Shoot the fuck out of it.”

“It?” said Crockett, frowning.

The sheriff nodded. “I’m not ruling anything out.”



Dr. Rachel Shelton opened her eyes at cockcrow. Her first thought was of the murderer who'd been heading east up Burnt Chestnut, one house at a time. Now it was their turn. When she raised her head, the light through the wavy glass of the window cast a mirage of a ghostly field of Mexican sunflowers across her pillowcase.

She sat upright in bed, wearing flannel pajamas spotted with yellow ducks. Dew clung to the bedroom windows. The panes glowed, casting scintillating spots on the Winchester rifle that lay on the bureau, atop a pile of last week's newspapers, all filled with bad news.

She swung her legs over and touched her feet to the cool floor, then changed her mind, lying back and pulling the white damask duvet out of its hospital corners and over her head. What if something lay under the bed, waiting to nip her ankles and suck her blood? She shut her eyes and made her body stiff to stop trembling.

Critical hospital patients determined to live, despite a poor prognosis, at times tented blankets over their heads. As a cardiologist at the local hospital and medical examiner for the island, she referred to self-shrouding as the "Anti-scythe Sign." She was always happy to see it. This time, she thought, I'll try it myself.

Her husband lay sleeping, a felled oak beside her. She dug a knuckle into one of his armpits. Dave squirmed. She'd expected him to already be up when she woke. Since he wasn't—well, there'd better be a damned good reason. There were windows and doors to recheck—just in case—and an official meeting at six forty-five. The sheriff would knock a signal in Morse code to announce himself.

Aside from Dave's even breathing, there was no sound of human habitation. Not a peep from the boys' bedrooms, only the hum from the water pump, which meant the animals must be drinking. From the stables drifted the whistles and tut-tutting of birds—guinea fowl, peacocks, roosters, geese, and drakes.

If anything happened downstairs now, no one would be ready. She would not. Neither would Dave, and certainly not the boys. By the time they heard the tinkle of smashed glass, or the clang of a fallen candlestick, it would be too late. Before they leapt up and got to their rifles, there'd be heavy steps on the stairs. The rush of an intruder across the first landing, then his turning to run up the next shorter flight. Her family might as well be dead already.

First Ewell, then Petty. She'd poured over their cases, finding patterns. She poked her head from under the duvet. "Dave," she whispered.

He grinned in his sleep. His nostrils twitched. *What the hell is he thinking of—daisies?* He should be thinking of where best to crouch with a rifle. She pressed her mouth right up to his ear and with clenched teeth, tugged at a hair. He failed to stir. Last night's Ivory soap residue and baby powder still lingered on his neck.

Sunlight around her dropped in oppressive layers. "Dave."

His lids slid up. Rachel stared into his drowsy brown eyes. She wanted to shake him, make him get up, fetch their rifles, bullets, spare keys, pepper spray. There was something gravely, fatally wrong. She wanted him to fix it.

The horses would be running the fence line, wheeling in the low-cropped fields, then galloping back to their stalls. The deputies from the sheriff's office would be sitting grumpy at their posts, impatient for coffee. The temperature would be fifty,

humidity one hundred percent according to Weather.com. The boys should get out of their beds before they died in them. Zack and Leo should dress and then, if they wanted to, go back to sleep in their clothes.

“God, I’m going to throw up,” she groaned. A migraine was creeping up her neck, into one eye. Warped light from the window zigzagged over Dave in rainbow bands and played about the room. She imagined Zack and Leo sprawled in their beds, melting. “Dave, check on the boys.”

She put her feet on the dry oak floor and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “Okay. Let’s go.” He followed her down the hallway as she twisted her long brown hair into a knot. Rachel heard him patter off to the boys’ rooms and patter back. She crossed the marble threshold of the bathroom and steadied herself against the rim of the sink.

“They’re fine,” he said. He watched her lift the toilet seat, fold down onto her knees and vomit. “They’re still sleeping. Let them.”

Finished, she sat on the edge of the bathtub, watching his reflection in the mirror above the sink. Sweat coated her cheeks. She mopped it with a towel and blew a strand of moist hair from her eyes. Then stood and leaned against his trunk-like shoulder. “Wish we’d sent them away.” She swished her mouth with peroxide and loaded up the electric toothbrush.

He looked down and sighed. He pulled a face cloth off the rack, moistened it under cool water and wiped her neck.

“It wouldn’t have been any safer,” she said. “Maybe not even as safe, but I wish they weren’t here. We could’ve hid them, and been more careful. We’d be thinking clearer if they weren’t here worrying us.”

“The Harper children.” He rubbed the five days of shadow on his chin. “They were sent to Sharpsburg and look what happened.”

“I don’t want to think about them anymore!” Her hands were shaking when she put down the towel.

“I don’t know what to say to comfort you,” Dave sighed. “In the past three months, I...I...Who knows what else to do? I can’t come up with anything else—but this will be the last day of it. After today we won’t have to worry anymore.”

“Are you sure?” She sat back down on the edge of the enamel bathtub.

“Yes. I am.” His voice became insistent. “Absolutely.” The Russian blue, Nijinsky, coiled around his legs and purred. Dave turned and reached down to stroke him. “There’s been a definite pattern, as you say. When it’s broken, the terror will end. I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

“What does the sheriff say?”

“Same thing. It’ll all be over this time tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She stood and closed the door, shutting him out.

It’d been his idea to move from California to the small village of Zebulon. He’d found a brick Georgian with stables and a pasture behind it on Burnt Chestnut, the only paved street in town. Rachel had approved, sure, but the idea to move had been his. If only he hadn’t been laid off from Intel, they’d be somewhere else now. Safe.

Usually, in the mirror, she saw a woman in her thirties, strong, fit, capable. Today, only gaunt weariness appeared in the glass. Her neck too thin, skin greenish. Her sinewy arms drooped as she brushed her teeth. She wanted a shower. To let a spray of warm water soothe her. No. Nothing would help, not today. Her racquetball partner had once said she too would someday have the jiggly middle-aged upper arms he called *myrtles*. Myrtles wouldn’t matter if she were dead.

Dead, a voice said in the back of her mind. Or in the water pipes beneath the sink, or behind the mirror’s glass. Her face prickled. The trouble with old houses was they creaked and growled. Odd noises assumed the shapes of words if the mind were troubled.

Mist clouded the mirror’s surface. She wiped it with a washcloth and turned an ear toward it, hoping for only silence, as if wiping the glass would also clear her head. But from behind the mist, or, perhaps the pipes, came a new sound—persistent and low, almost a comfortable hum, but terrifying—the moan of a dying animal.

“Nijinsky,” she gasped, but the cat was gone. He must’ve followed Dave down the hall. Rachel felt an icy patch on the back of her neck and refused to turn around. If she did, her tired brain would again sculpt the image of the impaled Mr. Ewell

strung up in his living room.

She closed her eyes, slipped out of her pajamas, took a deep breath, and turned the shower on. The strange noises faded, replaced by the cascading splash of water. She stepped in and let hot water spray her face and massage her knotted shoulders.

She tried to envision comforting scenes to come. Easter, with Dave and the children, was only weeks away. There'd be plastic pastel eggs hidden in the first lilies of spring, in the narcissus, radiant with purple petals. But the happy images escaped. The water was growing cool, with a smell of rust, an odd stickiness running down her back. Dave had installed a ten-inch, chrome rain showerhead a few days before, a taste of luxury. But something was wrong—too much pressure, maybe, too many minerals in the water.

Rust poured from the nozzle tips, like milk from nipples. No, it was blood. It drenched her hair and streaked her naked body, covering her like a shroud. She opened her eyes and tried to scream, but no sound came from her locked throat. She struggled to break free, to turn off the spigot, but the drying coat of moisture, scab-like, held her in a cocoon.

Where is Dave? I'm going mad, she thought. Insane. She cried, and hot tears melted crusted blood on her face. Eyes shut, she began to counsel herself. "This is a hallucination," she whispered. "This is a thought disorder; too much dopamine in the brain, not enough GABA." When she opened her eyes, the blood was gone.

Panic, she thought. *Just sleep deprivation.*

Back in the bedroom, she listened for the practiced Morse-code knock downstairs, drying herself off and searching for traces of blood. Dave stood at the window looking out over the pasture.

Should she mention the new depth of her fear? No.

The grass had been stunted by the unseasonable cold of middle March. The assistant trainer, Lev, was leading Magistrate out of his stall for an early morning workout in the sand-and-crushed-rubber outdoor arena. In the middle of the pasture, Deputy Ruiz sat on a stump, eating a big stuffed biscuit, rifle across her knees.

"Her back is to the woods," Dave muttered. "She should be facing it."

Rachel zipped up her half-chaps. Maybe if they rode across the field and into the trees, they would find a clue. Dave was already dressed; his polished paddock boots waited on the side porch, draped over an arm of the swing. But neither of them made a move to leave the bedroom, to walk downstairs.

Fifteen or twenty minutes had already passed. The sheriff hadn't knocked.

"What if we die because of him?" Dave said, voice rising. Nijinsky loped down the stairs probably intending to crawl under the sofa. "What if we die because the sheriff's having coffee and donuts at the fucking diner?"

"I'm going to check the kids," said Rachel, cursing herself because she hadn't done so earlier, when at first she'd realized Wise was late. What did it mean? If something had happened to the sheriff, their first line of defense was down fifteen minutes after sunrise.

She ran to Leo's room and threw the door open. He was asleep. His blond hair and sweet face shone on his pillow. She took a deep breath, pulled the door shut and hurried down the hall. Rachel found him half-awake, looking up with half-closed eyes. Blue ear buds in his ears, he was hugging Wolfgang, the family dachshund.

Satisfied, she tip-toed to Zack's room. She looked around, and put a hand to her mouth, unable to speak.

Every surface was usually covered with clothes, schoolbooks, CDs, sheet music, guitar picks, earplugs, spare change, condoms. Now the books were all shelved in alphabetical order, by author. The DVDs and CDs racked by category. The oak floor polished. As if he'd stayed up all night cleaning, getting ready for something momentous. She opened Zack's closet. Even his shoes were lined up in neat rows on the floor. She closed the door, and gently lowered the bolt into its strike, making only a tiny click. She pulled open a drawer—underwear folded.

"God!" she said. Zack stirred.

"Honey, did you stay up late cleaning your room last night?"

"No, Mom," he groaned. "Too busy practicing. Need to sleep in."

A tingle iced Rachel's neck and arms. He must've been lying, but he had no reason to. "Go back to sleep, honey."

“Love you, Mom,” he mumbled.

She kissed his cheek, then shut the door.

Dave stepped up behind her. He touched her waist with both hands. “Let’s get downstairs.”

“Maybe we should wait for the—you know—secret knock.”

“We can take the rifles.”

“Good.” Back in the bedroom, she picked up the two rifles leaning next to the closet. *Wait—hadn’t one of them been sitting like a paperweight on the newspapers on the dresser, under Dave’s latest of a series of oil paintings of black sheep?* She walked back to the dresser to look at the painting and drew in a breath. Dave’s signature had changed. It slanted left now, not right, as it had been when he’d painted the mural of those poor cattle in a dry feedlot, waiting for death. *Maybe the cattle mural, or something in the house, had caused his mind to take a bend to the left, a bend sinister, as Nabokov might have called it.*

She dismissed the thought as foolish.

Rachel stomped into the hallway, a gun slung over each shoulder.

“Did you move one of these?” she said.

“What?”

“They were both leaning against the wall.” She handed him one. “But I saw one on the dresser this morning.”

He shouldered the rifle, looking bewildered. “No. I dunno.”

“Guns don’t just get up and walk! Did you or did you not move it?”

“No,” he snapped. “Maybe Zack did.”

“Oh, here we go, again. Blaming Zack. How could he have moved it? He’s been asleep.”

“Rachel.” Dave lowered his voice. “You’re being hysterical.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

“Well, I don’t like yours.”

“If you want people to listen, you’ll whisper instead of yell.”

“I’m not the one who’s yelling.”

“Shut up.” She put a hand up. “Please. No, wait. Let’s start over. Sorry,” she said. He glanced at his wristwatch and swallowed. “The Harper boys were killed in Sharpsburg by blasts from a shotgun. So, I’m not worrying about wandering rifles.”

The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed four times, off by

hours, as usual. Dave looked up the way a startled dog might.

“One boy got it in the head, the other in the chest.”

“I said I don’t want to think about that. Why are you saying these things?” She pressed a palm against an eye. “I don’t want pictures in my head of little boys with blood and brains leaking out of bullet holes! Okay?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...I don’t think we have to worry about being shot. He, or they, have never killed the same way twice.”

“Wonderful, Goddamn it!”

“Okay, okay.”

Her shoulders relaxed a little. But what if they went down and the furniture had been rearranged? In the parlor, the big sofa with eight cushions standing in place of the baby grand? The baby grand in place of the sofa? What if the black sheep Dave had painted were gone and her laptop with all of her important documents in its hard drive were drowning in the kitchen sink? What if someone was waiting, even now, holding his breath, bare feet making no sound on the thick Persian rug the color of pumpkin pie?

The hallway was frigid, as if a window had been left open in the dead of winter. But it was spring. They were all shut.

“Please turn off the air,” she said.

“Okay. Let’s go down. Sometimes we don’t hear knocks on the door from up here. For all we know, the sheriff’s waiting on the porch, maybe waiting on the swing.”

“I wish he’d stay off it,” she said, thinking of Wise’s girth.

The garden was a checkerboard of crocuses and jonquils and tall unruly boxwoods. For the most part, however, the view was clear to the scattered houses across the road. But, on the east and west sides of the house, tangles of bushes and overgrown ivy were thick enough to conceal a crawling man. Sheriff Wise might be checking out the cottage where Rachel’s mother, Beatrice, slept. It was closer to the road than the main house, and off to one side. To the north was a pasture and to the east lay a dense thicket of pine and oak over a hundred years old, threaded with Virginia creeper, sweetbriar, and poison ivy.

Last spring, while Beatrice was still living in the main house, she’d used masking tape to delineate her boundaries. “This is my domain,” she’d announced to them. The formal dining room,

living room, parlor, and the downstairs bathroom with the claw-footed porcelain tub had been proclaimed part of the Kingdom of Beatrice. She'd gotten incensed anytime the boys had crossed into her realm and jumped on the bed.

Finally, she'd hired a contractor to build an apartment in what had been the detached garage. A small price to pay to eliminate daily battles over which space was whose.

But Rachel missed her company. Beatrice had provided comic relief and flashes of esoteric wisdom in a family packed with overachievers. A medical anthropologist, in her younger days she'd researched pre-industrial cultures that practiced pagan rites, including Kuru sorcery. Beatrice had learned "how to open the gates to other worlds," from Dagara shamans of West Africa, and studied the use of rain forest herbs to induce altered states in Ecuadorian Carib Amerindians. Her monograph on voodoo rituals performed in forests, backrooms of churches, and government buildings was in the Library of Congress.

Rachel's mother believed in a creator beyond religion. Beatrice was also a collector of little pieces of truth to get a broader view of creation and was proud of her spirituality, her wide knowledge of world religions. She'd collected unmarked marble slabs around the Sheltons' property that'd turned out to be old footstones, initials worn off by centuries of rain and wind. She'd leaned them upright against the brick foundation of the cottage, where they slumped like pale hunchbacks.

Dave slipped into Leo's room, past the sleeping boy, and looked out a front window. Rachel tiptoed in behind and scanned the empty road, too. No sheriff. No patrol car. No movement in Zebulon except a few guinea fowl foraging, sharp beaks stabbing bark for grubs. Only empty-eyed houses met her gaze. Most of their neighbors had fled, some to homes of friends and relatives, others to Washington—where they could convince themselves they'd be safe. Or any place they were unknown.

Whoever had killed the Harper children were, evidently, willing to travel. How? Why?

Rachel stared at the woods east of the cottage with narrowed eyes. She took Dave's hand and squeezed it.

"They'll come from the east," she said. "Under a full moon, they'll need the trees to hide them, unless there's a storm."

“Let’s get downstairs,” he said.

He paused on the landing, looking out the bay window. “There’s no one outside.”

There were ghost stories about this stairway, but Rachel couldn’t remember most of them and didn’t believe them anyway. She could recall there’d been at least one death on the stairs, long before she’d been born. Old Mr. Nelson, a former owner and barrister to the Middlemarch County court, having been wounded in the Powagansett Indian War, had fallen asleep on a window seat on the landing, where he’d quietly died. Or so the realtor had told her.

No pain, no fuss. She had a feeling it wasn’t true.

Still, she walked behind Dave, close enough to smell soap on his neck. She didn’t believe in ghosts. But hairs on her arms rose up and her nape chilled, as if Old Nelson had leaned out to touch her.

By the time they reached the huge foyer downstairs, some of her fear had gone. The oversized wardrobe for coats, the eternally late grandfather clock had a comforting solidity. Other rooms still needed to be inspected. In the parlor, nothing had been rearranged. The fireplace wood stove in its proper spot, the wingback chairs still upright and holding down the pumpkin Persian carpet.

Backtracking through the parlor, they found the entry bathroom in order. The faucet of the claw-footed tub still leaked in quarter notes. Beyond, the dining room table remained upright and still cluttered with files and books. Dave sat in a banker’s chair in front of a few newspapers describing the murders while Rachel stuck her head into the kitchen, the pantry, the utility room.

“All clear,” she called. A roll of wrapping paper slid off a high shelf and hit her head. She shrieked and jumped. *Snowmen, Joie Noelle*, she thought. *Will we see Christmas this year?*

She breathed easier sitting at the table, holding a rifle, waiting. *Where is that damned sheriff?* Rachel felt a second wave of nausea. She swallowed, and it passed.

Dave was staring at her. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I mean, okay. I need a scopolamine patch.” She laid her gun on the table pointing toward the window, away from Dave.

She returned with a patch, peeled off the backing and stuck it behind one ear, tossing the packaging into a fireplace stove that still smelled like Christmas soot. “Does the sheriff think they’ll use a gun again?”

“No,” he said. “For several reasons.”

She felt briefly happy. The killer, or killers, would probably not use a gun this time. But then again, maybe they would.

She wished for fewer windows. Theirs looked over the high shrubbery of the yard, the wide pasture of orchard grass and clover, the old stables behind the house, the woods and beds of vinca around the cottage where her mother lay sleeping. But they all had glass panes everyone had to sit by, and walk in front of. Bullets flew easily through windows.

Dave, even now, looked like he was anticipating being shot. Skin pale and moist. A few minutes ago, he’d smelled like soap. But now he smelled a touch rancid, like an old acorn, like rusted metal, like fear. He fidgeted, moisture beading on his forehead and cheeks. Why didn’t he get up and do something instead of planting himself like a stump in front of the window?

She could imagine a bullet spinning through the air as it flew, till it crashed through glass and his temple.

“Why are you crying?” he said.

She rushed into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee for the adults. Hell, why not the kids? Maybe they should all take Ritalin, too—a drug that enhanced intellectual performance in high- stress situations. And what could be more stressful than waiting to be murdered?

Everything in the kitchen looked alive, sleek and groomed by light. The butcher-block centerpiece glowed honey-brown with streaks of aged black. No doubt germ colonies were festering in the moist spaces in the wood. Stacked Drabware glistened inside the hutch. She wiped her eyes with a dishtowel sticky with Palmolive, then folded it up.

The quartzite countertop and backsplash were inlaid with stainless bumble bees that seemed newborn. They made her think of fragments of a favorite poem:

This is paradise, he said

This is the same sun that shone on Adam

And the same wind too

She clenched her fists. How dare anyone threaten all she had! Not just the house and farm, but her life. The lives of her husband and children, everything she'd worked for, everything she'd dreamed of, fought for, for so many years.

To be a horse trainer, mother, doctor—none of it easy. Not the early mornings in the stables and saddle, the hours of cooking and cleaning, the twelve-hour shifts at the hospital where she went room to room trying to restart hearts or comfort the dying. And the coaxing of her computer into cooperative chatter. God, she hated computers. She was technologically impaired.

Hot tears burned her cheeks. Finding herself in a trance before the opened refrigerator, holding a carton of cream, she slammed it shut. A magnetic photograph of Zack and Leo at the beach fell to the stone floor. She stuck it back on the stainless steel door.

“Coffee ready?” called Dave, drumming his fingertips on the leather top of the dining table.

“I haven't...” she started, then saw the glowing red light of the machine on the counter, the coffee already hot and steaming. Where had she been the last five minutes?

Rachel poured the brew into two brown mugs, and carried them into the dining room, glad that she'd only filled them half full. Her hands were shaking. Dave was at the door to the side porch, staring through its small window at the empty, waiting, slatted swing.

She offered him his coffee, frowning. “Look at that chandelier.” The crystal was gray and cloudy, even furry looking. Like a fungus.

“What's wrong?” He took a sip of coffee. Two heaping tablespoons of sugar in the cup. “It's covered with dust.”

“Can't be. Sylvia cleaned yesterday.”

She reached up to touch the central fob. Grease slid between thumb and forefinger. She held it under his nose. “Look.”

“Cigarette tar?” he said. “Huh. Where'd that come from?” He sneezed. “I thought you'd quit.”

She rubbed the schmutz on a napkin and slumped into a chair. “I did. Fifteen years ago. I haven't smoked since medical school.”

A brown shield-shaped bug clicked as it crawled across the table. Rachel smashed it under her napkin, then regretted it. The crushed body stunk like garbage, like death.

“A brown marmorated stink bug.” Dave said.

Looking up, Rachel glanced through the dining room window at a four-horse trailer pulled by a diesel pickup down Burnt Chestnut Road. The rusted old rig struggled, brown smoke curling from its exhaust pipe.

“It’s making no sound,” Dave said. Rachel strained her ears to listen, but only silence came from the road. Dave was looking at her now, his eyes stunned.

Wolfgang, the dachshund, stopped snoring under the table. The sparrows that had been chirping had also quieted, as if listening to something outside the range of human hearing. The chickens had ceased clucking, the whistle and hum of guinea fowl ceased. A solitary car passed without engine noise and the swoosh of tires.

Rachel tensed. She dried her eyes and joined Dave at the door to the side porch, putting her arms around him. The empty slatted swing was rocking slowly back and forth. Sand-dollar wind chimes hung above it, suspended in silence.

It had been twenty-nine and one-half days since the deaths of the children next door. Fifty-eight days since Petty had been axed in the head two doors down. Eighty-one days since the initial murder three doors down. The killer was moving east down Burnt Chestnut one house at a time. Now it was their turn.

She sat again at the table and sneezed at the musty-earmpit scent of wild phlox. None of the doors or windows was open. The latches were locked. The aroma must have wafted in from some unknown gap.

The door to the nook on the landing, built as a discreet shortcut for kitchen staff, slammed shut. She flinched. “Did you hear that?”

Dave was focused on checking the ammunition in his rifle, his long legs stretched into a giant V, his feet nudging hers under the table, sliding to either side. No room for them otherwise.

“What?” He shoved the bolt and closed the breech.

The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed five times. Relentless as always in its declarations of the wrong time.

Dave clicked off the rifle's safety and laid the gun before him. "Are you...okay?" His hesitancy dispelled any illusions of safety.

She half-smiled. "You're a great father and a wonderful husband. I want you to know that."

He didn't meet her eyes, only glanced away from the Winchester in her general direction. "I'm a lump." He lowered his head into his hands.

The grandfather clock chimed again, one stroke this time, as if to underscore his defeat. "Remember when we first bought the house?" she said quickly, to resurrect his spirits.

"No one else wanted it because the neighbors said it was haunted." Rachel laughed the kind of laugh that gets caught in the throat and turns into a sigh. "We thought we were getting such a great deal. We should've listened."

"It was gorgeous. The rooms are massive," he said lifting his head. "You really liked it."

"Yes," said Rachel. "I did. And empty of everything except an old clock that never knows what fucking time it is."

She glared at the old Victorian timepiece. It stood seven feet high, brassy moon-face cold and foreboding. There was a stain on the wood surrounding the face that wouldn't come out despite scouring and oiling—perhaps blood? She wished now they'd donated it to the church thrift shop. Every few days Dave would open its case and set the weights for the chimes, yet they never worked when they were supposed to. Out of turn, out of time, the clock seemed to be speaking, of its own volition, of their future.

There'd been a similar clock in the house of the first murder victim. It alone had been left standing upright in the middle of the room, the rest of the furniture toppled and misplaced all around it. Its face turned to the wall as its owner's body swung from bicycle chains dangling beside it, a hole in the floor yawning above it, a rainbow of blood spanning the wall it faced, shocked silent as a witness to murder.



Sheriff Wise drove one hundred yards east down Burnt Chestnut to the home of Revel Petty. Once a medical equipment repairman, Mr. Petty had retired to become an arborist five years ago. He'd been murdered twenty-nine days after H.V. Ewell.

Petty's home was known to locals as *Daisyland*, or just *the yellow house*, and was famous for the way its front garden glittered in summer. And for the way the jewelry of passersby would tug toward it if Petty were working on his magnetic generator. He'd also been inventing a form of translucent concrete, and had confided to his neighbors that his cityscapes would one day be springing up like crystal villages.

At Harper's Pharmacy, Zebulonians and the occasional tourist could purchase postcards of Daisyland, photographed on the Fourth of July. In the picture a giant flag flapped in the wind above the yellow mailbox, its stars and stripes caught in mid-ripple by Mr. Harper's digital camera. White daisies and yellow black-eyed Susans lined the crescent shell drive, filled the flowerbeds, and exploded out of each canary-yellow box hung beneath the spotless windows of the 1920s Sears bungalow.

But that was just a postcard. Now, it was barely spring; and all the wishing in the world wouldn't make it summer,

or bring back Harmon Venable Ewell or Revel Petty. Faded yellow crocuses had tentatively poked their heads through the loam bordering the circular drive. A belt of jonquils lined the otherwise-dormant beds in front of the house. Some blew yellow trumpets to Heaven, while others leaned together, like mourners holding each other upright. Ancient magnolias stood sentinel around the house, their precocious blooms blushing cream in the sun's early morning rays. Someone had just mowed a lawn and the cut-grass aroma drifted through the car's window. It tickled Wise's nose and got him sneezing.

The sheriff pulled into the marl driveway, sun-bleached clamshells crackling beneath his tires. He switched off the engine and sat behind the wheel a moment, his ample belly pressing the steering wheel. At last, he reached into the back seat, grabbed a bomber jacket and got out. A warming wind puffed between damp magnolias, carrying salt scent from the Atlantic, which lay three miles east of Zebulon. He still detected a scent of burnt wood, but there were no campfires, nor were there people around to start them.

In spite of the unseasonable warmth, he zipped up the coat to his neck, flipped up his collar, took ski gloves out of his pockets and forced his fingers into the tightly padded spaces. He felt hotter than a whore in church, but knew it wouldn't last.

He wished for about the tenth time he had another deputy or two for the postings. But the county could afford only three. He'd have to make do. Time was working against him. The first order of business was to protect the Sheltons. The second, to figure out the killer's motive in order to find him—preferably before dark.

The locking mechanism of Daisyland's sun-yellow front door had been obliterated the night of the murder, as if the killer held a grudge against all things mechanical, including Petty. When Wise pressed his shoulder against the door, it slowly creaked open. He stepped over the jamb, hesitated. "Sweet Jesus, give me strength," he mumbled. He squatted and reexamined the busted-up yellow door, as a doctor looks over his patient. The hinges groaned with each touch.

The knob had been battered off by something blunt—perhaps the poll of an axe. For the first time he noticed a trace of soot.

Not a print, which he could've dusted, but an ashy smudge on the door at eye level. Perhaps one of the deputies had been smoking. Then he remembered: everyone at the station had quit and had taken up gum chewing or Krispy Kremes instead. Except Ruiz; she was too pretty to smoke, but she was hopelessly addicted, often puffing away at electronic cigarettes, or plastering herself with nicotine patches.

Wise removed the phone from his pocket and snapped a picture of the smudge, which floated on the door like a tiny cloud.

"Damn the state police," he muttered. "Sons of bitches shouldn't have dumped us." He shook his head. "Hmph. Well, no time like the present."

The sheriff stepped over a bloodstain inside the threshold.

Revel Petty had just opened the door when the sharp blade of an axe split his forehead down the middle.

There was no way this murder was the work of Steve Dix. The FBI and state police called off their dogs the night after the second murder, when Dix confessed to killing both Ewell and Petty. But the guy was a lunatic, schizoaffective, with PTSD.

"He'd confess to anything," the sheriff had told them. "But he's no killer." Now Dix was being held at Middlemarch Regional Jail with all the county's petty thieves and meth cooks. The sheriff shook his head. "Law enforcement," he mumbled. "Damn lemmings."

Wise leaned over the sofa, which had been pulled away from the wall. He lifted the cushions and peered into the seat, deeming it safe, free from explosives or other hidden weapons.. He sank into the softness of the foam-rubber pillows and surveyed the room. Like the furniture arrangement at H.V. Ewell's house, the contents of Daisyland looked like a manic jumble of items at an estate sale. Revel Petty, however, had been a minimalist, except when it came to his fully equipped laboratory in the basement, and his garden. There was very little furniture. A trunk and two shelves—still packed with books on horticulture, landscaping, plant pathology, electronics and power plants—now faced the wall. A single rug, its pattern yellow corn woven into a bright orange background, was rolled up and standing on end. An oil painting of Daisyland done by local artist David Shelton had been torn from its frame and lay face-up

in front of the hearth.

Where the painting had hung was a hole the size of a manhole cover.

Sheriff Wise sniffed at the fireplace. No ashes. No recent fire. The scent he detected in the yard had to be coming from somewhere else. He'd returned to Daisyland time and again because of the strange cold. Petty's laboratory, just off the living room, had been brutally dismantled. Tables turned over and thrown against walls, scattered papers, collapsed shelves, shards of glass like bits and pieces of ice.

Even as he sat on the couch, the temperature around him dropped.

It wasn't the first time he'd felt the cold breath of the inexplicable. There'd been the strange case of Maudie Pruitt's grave, Wise's first assignment after joining the force.

One night, as Maudie lay in bed with her sleeping husband, a spirit appeared. "Don't go outside tonight. Death awaits you," it'd croaked. Later, her husband had gone into the backyard in spite of her pleas. Something was after the chickens. She'd waited for a half hour, her terror escalating. Finally, she'd put on her robe and went outside to find him. The night was inky black, too black for her candle. A rabid fox rushed up to nip her heel. Three drops of blood fell to a slate footer on her garden pathway. Three weeks later, she was stark mad from rabies, then smothered to death by the doctor and nurse between two feather bed pillows, the only cure. Mr. Pruitt used the slate she'd bled on as a headstone. A hundred years later, Wise was called upon to investigate a neighbor's complaint that the slate turned red as blood and the air turned icebox cold every time it rained.

Sitting on the couch in Petty's house, Wise recalled standing in the wild copse of brush and trees that shielded the headstone while cedars swayed above him, whispering their sacred song. There was no rain to draw the blood from the slate that night. With his flashlight's beam shakily focused on Maudie's faintly engraved name, he urinated on the headstone.

"Sure, it turns red," he'd reported back, teeth chattering. "But I can't do nothin' about it."

After his encounter with Maudie's ghost, why should Petty's house scare him? As in the case of Maudie's graveyard, he felt a

curious absence of fear. Maybe the implications of these murders were so staggering his mind was refusing to respond.

He moved to the foot of the staircase and contemplated the icy crystals that seemed to be forming in the air before his eyes. The chill followed like a panting dog. He stood, waiting, until his breath seemed to be burning with ice. He coughed and blew it from him, then stepped out of the icy box of air and walked into the hall.

His eyes locked on his watch: thirty seconds, forty seconds, one minute. In spite of the heavy leather jacket, he was shivering in sixty seconds flat.

He pulled off a glove and stuck a bare hand out as far as it would reach, all the way through the igloo frigid cube of chilled air. His hand tingled as it slowly warmed. Yes, the damned box of cold was following him.

To hell with the state police. He turned toward the kitchen door as if he'd heard something. Yes, he had. He was certain of it. The sound of boots walking over linoleum. A faint whoosh, then a crunching sound, as if someone or something were walking away through snow.

He drew his gun and held it before him, bracing it in case he had to fire.

"Hold up there," he shouted, and listened. If the door creaked open, he'd rush into the kitchen, pursuing the intruder. Everything by the book. If the footsteps stopped, he'd take one more step and ease into the room. The drawn gun weighed heavy in his hands. The cold came back with a vengeance, clutching at his chest and throat.

There was no sound now, except for the singing of birds in the backyard. "If you move, I'll shoot," he said, stepping over the threshold.

The kitchen was empty of two-legged creatures, the dawning yellow light settling on the table, the sink, the cupboard, the chairs set back at random around the room as if the sun were trying to memorize such artifacts.

"Be damned," said the sheriff, "I know you're in here."

Puddles on the slate floor were beginning to ice over. The air thickened into a freezing mist. Mr. Petty's green, enameled stove was shining with frost. In front of the refrigerator stood a

column of fog that advanced a few feet, twisting like an octopus made of snowflakes, extending multiple arms.

The sheriff holstered his revolver. Let it come to me, he thought at first, but changed his mind and stepped forward. No sense in wasting time this morning by trying to set horses with such a disagreeable fellow. “Don’t figure you’re worth much.”

Pulling his collar up against the fierce freezing, the sheriff blew more ice from his lungs, moved forward, and stepped into the specter, pushing into its maw. Entombed. No sight or sound then, no movement, only his own heart beating and brain working. He pushed harder and something gave way, as if he had penetrated a wall of Jell-O.

At last, he was free, gasping, leaning on the refrigerator, watching snow fall onto the kitchen linoleum, then melt in sunlight. *Reckon I’m about done here*, he told himself. After resting for a few moments, he walked back into the living room and unzipped his jacket.

The furniture had levitated six inches off the floor.

“Be damned,” he muttered. “Whoever...whatever you are, I know you’re after somethin’. Don’t know what it is. Don’t reckon you’re about to tell me, either.”



Dave sat before a bare window rubbing sweaty palms onto the doeskin knee patches of his pants. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll drop dead like my dad at forty-eight. You’ll be rid of me.”

“Stop it,” Rachel said, sipping coffee at the dining room table.

“But then, who’ll splice the irrigation system to cover the back field, or play ball with the boys.”

He stared at an obese, fuzzy squirrel noshing something in its paws, bending a walnut branch to the ground. He felt an absolute need for an ‘Atta boy’ moment, but decided to go easy on his heaving sighs and operatic eye rolling. If he pushed the self-indulgence too far, Rachel would stalk away and begin one of her all-day bathing rituals.

No. He guessed she wouldn’t. *Not today.*

If he could coax some color into her face, they’d be better off.

“I’ve checked out Google Earth,” Rachel said. “The woods to the west of Ewell’s run from Main Street for about a half mile north to the woods. It’s wide enough to conceal two Zebulons. The killers could have camped there until dark, then hit the houses without being seen.”

“They could’ve come from the north,” said Dave.

“And cross the pasture in moonlight,” Rachel said, flatly. “This time, they’ll come from the east. The woods are smaller,

but thicker, closer to the house. They might already be in there.”

“Not likely in daylight.”

“They might have scouted it out and left some tracks.”

“Maybe not,” said Dave, declining to humor her. “It’ll be all right. Sheriff Wise’ll be here soon. And the deputies to protect us.”

“Are you cold?” she asked, rubbing her arms.

“No.” He studied the street outside. Empty, except for a turkey vulture feasting on a carcass, which looked like a possum’s. A motorcycle sped by, but no sound came inside.

The sun had not yet lit the house. Traces of dew were still evaporating from the windows. In just jeans and a wife-beater shirt, no wonder she felt cold. She disdained central heating as wasteful and dirty, and only used it when the kids whined about cold feet, or when they had guests.

Dave got up to put kindling and split logs into the dining room wood stove, and then sat at the table to read the Middlemarch News.

“I’ll ride Le Pouf today if you ride Slivovitz,” she said. “We could head east, into the woods.”

“We need to go now. But Le Pouf’s a psycho,” Dave said, looking at the crime report.

“Le Pouf’s madness is the least of my worries,” Rachel said suddenly. “We can’t leave the kids.”

“We could have the deputies scout the woods.”

“They won’t know where to look. They really can’t get through there on foot. The only way in there is on horses or dirt bikes.”

“Okay,” said Dave. “We’ll ride the game trails into the woods and the sheriff and deputies will stay here with the boys. Lev will be here too.”

A look of uncertainty settled on Rachel’s face. “I wish Aristino were still alive. He was rock-solid on the trail. He’d do anything for me.”

A mug shot of Steve Dix stared into Dave’s eyes from the newspaper page, looking bewildered. Dave squinted at the face. A total lack of comprehension. No malice. Steve Dix was not the killer.

“Last time you rode Le Pouf he put bruises all over your body. You got shaken-baby syndrome from the leaping and bucking.”

Rachel rose from the table. "I'm getting more coffee." Soon the clatter of dishes, glasses, and pots and pans vibrated off the kitchen walls in angry cacophony.

"Rach," he said. "Everything okay?"

"There's nothing left in the pot," she called back.

"Then make some more." He couldn't take his eyes off the picture of Dix. The simple face of a child, in spite of his age.

"But it was half full! I'm sure of it. I brewed twelve cups."

"Obviously not."

"At least a couple ought to be left."

Something was wrong in her voice; too much insistence.

"Maybe Lev had some," Dave said. Their assistant usually entered the house by the kitchen door. He had free run of the downstairs and often came in for coffee or protein shakes.

"Maybe something else came and drank the coffee," she said. This time making a joke, it seemed to him.

"Not funny. Probably evaporated."

He heard her start singing something from *Les Misérables*, faintly, then the rattle of coffee beans taken from the cabinet.

A grinder roared. Water poured into a coffee maker.

He checked the fire in the dining room stove and rearranged the wood with a red-hot poker. Snapping flames engulfed kindling, licking at the split logs retrieved from the side porch, where he and the boys had stacked them against the brick wall last Halloween.

"Want me to go find Lev and ask if he stole our coffee?"

Her voice came back sounding almost frantic. "No! Don't do that."

After closing the iron door to the stove, he went to look out the window by the side porch, telling himself he'd see the sheriff's car pulling in.

The driveway was empty. "Fuck," he mumbled, feeling a moment of pure panic that caused his limbs to shake, his face to flush, his mouth to go dry. It was all he could do to keep from grabbing his rifle and running outside and shouting a challenge to whatever was hiding in the thick woods beyond his mother-in-law's cottage. Feral dogs had been seen tearing through the overflow of trash from the green boxes on Holly's Church Road. Maybe—

“Should we go get your mother?” he called to Rachel.

“No, too early. Let her sleep. Here’s your coffee.”

Before he could turn, Rachel plopped down into a creaky chair at the big mahogany dining table. She slid a saucer with a third cup across the polished surface to Dave. A blueberry scone tilted off the edge of the saucer.

“I’m frightened for you and the boys.” He felt his face grow red. Sweat beaded his lip. He rose and went to the front door, rifle in hand, and opened it to scan the property. The air carried a lingering, charred smell. But bonfires were forbidden in Zebulon this month due to the fire department’s lack of funding.

No Sheriff Wise. Nijinsky wove through Dave’s legs like a snake, then darted out before he had time to close the door.

He sighed. “I feel cooler, a little better.”

“Listen,” Rachel said. “Nothing in the world has the right to make us frightened in our own home!”

“You’re right. It doesn’t.”

The hair on her arms stood straight up. The cold made her cheeks and nose rosy. The winter before, he’d covered her with a Navajo blanket after she’d been shivering and laughing with the boys. They’d made eyes, nose, mouth, ears, a hairdo, and finger and toenails all out of coal for the snowman they’d called “Schneemann.”

Dave’s coffee was too hot so he ate the scone first. He picked the mug up, blew and slurped, watching Rachel. She leaned on her elbows and stared out the window, hands wrapped around the steaming mug. A patrol car was pulling into the driveway. “He’s here.”

Dave let his head roll over the high back of his chair and sighed. “Funny, I didn’t even hear it.”

Rachel rose and went to the glass door leading to the porch.

Dave joined her and reached for her cold hand as Sheriff Wise got out of the white Crown Victoria. She pulled away and knitted her fingers in front of her. Footsteps echoed from the floor above them.

“Boys must be up,” said Dave.

“I don’t think so,” said Rachel.

Sheriff Wise was a tall, fat man, apple-shaped, symmetrical,

and well-muscled—an ex- football player who had simply rounded. Dave liked him. He was always orderly, organized into his pressed uniform, blue pants with a stripe, a dark-blue tie to match, and a light blue shirt with a gold badge.

“Maybe he can help,” said Rachel. “Maybe he can’t.”

She sat in front of the magnetic Diamond Dust kitchen knife sharpener and began grinding an edge on the knives her mother, Beatrice, had given them for their fourth wedding anniversary. “Watching Rachel use that old-fashioned strickle is so tedious,” Bea had told him.

Dave watched from inside the beveled glass door as the sheriff scanned the yard, then slammed the patrol car’s door with a meaty palm. He seemed to have used excessive force, yet Dave heard no thud. Wise’s gun belt was strapped around the crest of his stomach, rather than sagging below it. The blackened grip of the gun protruded from the holster. Dangling handcuffs glinted in the morning sun that was finally making its way into the yard in stray, soggy beams.

He flung open the porch door and poked his head out. “You’re late,” he called, making angry contact with the black bug-eyes of the sheriff’s metal-framed Ray-Bans.

Wise seemed to pretend not to hear. He walked into the house, past Dave, a bounce in his step. “Sweet Jesus, here I come,” he muttered.

Dave flared his nostrils and inhaled. Old Spice and soot wafted off Wise’s close-shaven cheeks. “Been near a fire today?”

“Not t’day.” The sheriff paused by the stove, cleaning the receiver of his cell phone with an alcohol wipe before slipping it back in his pocket.

“Can you get a cup of coffee for the sheriff?”

Rachel was lining up the sharpened knives on the table, by size. “Weapons?” Wise asked.

She smirked and went into the kitchen to hold open the outside screen door for Lev, who was carrying two black rubber buckets. “Fetching coffee is beneath my pay scale,” she grumbled.

Young Lev followed her into the dining room. He looked down at his boots, his brow knitting. He had round dark eyes, thick lashes, and wavy chestnut hair that framed a heart-shaped face.

Rachel peered into the buckets and covered her mouth.

“Found an army of dead frogs floating on top of the duck pond in algae blooms. The water’s all red,” said Lev.

He set the buckets down on the floor without sloshing. Dave stared at the bloated frogs then glanced up at Lev. His stomach flipped. The corners of Lev’s full lips turned down, puckering a scar that ran from the right side of his lip to his cheekbone.

“Could be some virulent fungus,” Dave said, fanning away the rotten-egg stench with his hand.

“Maybe too many lily pads on the top, blocking the light?” Rachel said, shaking her head. “Bury the frogs. Then drain the pond.”

“I’ll drag it first then siphon it out with a hose,” Lev said.

“Never seen anything like it,” the sheriff admitted, “but then, I don’t know much about frogs.”

“Please take them back outside.” Rachel covered her nose and mouth with a tea towel, holding the door open for Lev who was carrying a bucket in the crook of each arm.

Dave shifted from one foot to the other, uneasy. His wife was shaken, disappearing into the kitchen. Over frogs. Simply dead frogs. On any other day, the incident would have passed, handled rationally. But this was a day in which rifles vanished and sounds from the outside world failed to penetrate the glass of the windows of his home.

He looked at the sheriff. Wise said nothing. He didn’t even seem surprised. *He must know something that he’s not telling us*, Dave thought, then dismissed the notion. *But why would he keep any information from us?*

“Thanks, Lev. We’ll be out in a little while,” Dave said.

Leaving Wise at the table, he followed Rachel into the kitchen and closed the door behind him. She stood with arms crossed, scowling at the coffee maker. He put a hand on her arm.

“Okay, it could be a fungus,” she said, shrugging. “Maybe the frogs floated up out of hibernation too early. I don’t know.” She shook her head, eyes misted with a far-away look.

“Or maybe it’s a death knell.”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes today.”

She pivoted away.

He slipped up beside her, leaning forward, turning his face

toward her so she had to look at him. She shut her eyes and tossed her hair, then stared doggedly at her black boots.

“Listen to me.” Dave tightened his grip on her arm. “Turn your face here and look into my eyes.”

“Not now,” she said, sweat shining on her lip, head still bowed as if in prayer.

He blew across her cheeks. “I’m not letting go until you show me your eyes,” he said.

She gazed up.

Dave spoke softly. “You’ve got a tear with a rainbow inside it running down one cheek.”

Her misty pupils were great ebony discs. “We’ve got to work together,” he said.

“But we are.”

“Good,” said Dave. “I think the sheriff knows something he’s not telling us.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Dunno. Maybe he just doesn’t trust us to know it. Or maybe he thinks he’s the man in charge and he’s got to handle this himself.”

She leaned against him, his reflection tiny but whole in her almond-shaped eyes. She was forcing a smile. The forgetful grandfather clock in the foyer chimed as he kissed her. Her mouth tasted just like his: like wintergreen toothpaste and dark roast.

He returned to the dining room to find Sheriff Wise staring up at the grimy chandelier. “Whoa, now boy,” he was muttering, bass baritone rumbling in his massive chest. “Where ya’ goin’ thar?” He pointed a thick finger at the central fount.

Dave looked up. The dingy crystal fobs, layered in five inverted tiers like an upside down wedding cake, were vibrating as if the house’s foundations were rocking.

“Those boys thar look like thar fixin’ to go on a fox hunt,” said the sheriff, scratching his chin. A stink of sulfur crept from the chandelier to lasso the dining room, draw it in, and tighten like a noose.

Dave reached into the bottom tier and cupped a dangling crystal. The chandelier went still.

“Huh. Must like you, Dave. What’d you think of that?”

“Maybe it was a tremor.” The pull of a headache tugged at his forehead. “I think the house is still settling.”

“A chandelier quivering on its own ain’t just foundations settling. Seems like black gum against thunder to me.”

“What’s that mean, Sheriff?”

“Big trouble.”

Dave shrugged, eyes narrowing. “So I should stand here all day and watch that light fixture?”

“No. Jes’ keep an eye out. That’s all.”

“You know something I don’t?”

“What I know wouldn’t fill half a feed bag, Dave.” Wise paced. “Don’t worry your family more than you got to.”

From the kitchen came the sound of Rachel pouring coffee into the grinder again, followed by the clatter of beans cascading to the floor. “Dammit!” she shouted.

“What’s going on in there,” Dave called.

“I dropped the fucking canister. Sorry.”

The beans were practically gold nuggets, harvested from beneath a rain-forest canopy in Costa Rica, roasted in Zebulon by the Creeds, then wholesaled to box stores by Dave, online.

“I want to go back to Costa Rica,” Rachel shouted.

Dave looked out the window across the street to a tilled field. Dirt was harrowed across the thirty-acre tract in waves. A yellow biplane flying low dropped clouds of fertilizer. Dave pinched his nose and swallowed, as he did on jet flights trying to relieve air pressure. He looked over at Wise, who’d opened a pocket notebook and was writing something down.

“That crop duster was awfully close,” Dave said.

“I didn’t hear a sound either.” The sheriff squinted. “Huh... strange.” He cocked his head

“Fact is, Sheriff, I don’t hear a damn thing coming from outside.” Dave lifted his rifle and moved to the side door. “Not a peep.”

“Go ahead.” Wise lifted his chin. “Keep that rifle in your grip, jes’ in case.”

“Can you explain the silence outside?” said Dave.

“No, I can’t. I’m jes’ adding it to the list of things I know nuthin’ about.”

After a pause, Dave pushed the door open and sound came

blaring in. Not the roar of an airplane's engine, but, rather, a sawing, clicking chorus of insects. A huge dark smudge drifted across the eastern sky. He pulled the door closed, abruptly. "What the hell?"

"Locusts?" said Wise, standing behind him.

"Really?"

"But it ain't a swarmin' year."

"What if it is?"

The sheriff laughed. "Maybe the Israelites are about to escape from Egypt."

Dave didn't find the joke to be funny. He shook his head. After a few seconds, he opened the door and they both stepped out onto the porch. The insect chorus had given way to birdsong. The only thing blotting out the sun's rays were a few dark clouds scudding above the tree line.

"Don't tell Rachel about this," said Dave.

"Don't think it would do any good," said the sheriff, taking his folded handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow.

"Nope. It wouldn't. It doesn't do me a bit of good either."



The damned coffee will be ready in a minute,” Rachel said, stomping back into the dining room so hard the floor and walls vibrated. The chandelier seemed to sway. She found Dave and Sheriff Wise sitting across from each other at the table, each staring up at it. The crystal still reeked of old smoke, as if someone had built a campfire under it.

She glared down at Wise like an angry schoolteacher. “But today we die? Is that what you’re thinking?” She wiped her hands on her apron. “What do you think we should do?”

The sheriff squeezed his hands together, eyes still fixed on the chandelier. “Survive.”

“Then we’re wasting time. And as far as I’m concerned, if anyone else wants coffee, get it yourself. I’m done with this shit. I need to think.”

“Shhhh,” said Dave, holding up a palm. “The boys will hear you.”

She marched back into the kitchen, then returned with a mug of steaming coffee for Sheriff Wise. The two men were staring at each other, each with hands folded.

It looked as if Dave was struggling to hold back, but the question exploded from his lips. “Why were you late?”

“Wasn’t late. Jes’ not here.” The sheriff patted the butt end of his Glock 9mm pistol. “I’ve checked out the town and patrolled

the dirt roads 'bout the house. Searched the domiciles of the victims again. Posted Deputy Ruiz in the north pasture with the horses, Deputy Leveaux's in the woods. Put Deputy Crockett in charge of the previous crime scenes."

"Ruiz is just sitting out there on her sweet ass looking at the house." Rachel stood, legs apart, her hands squeezing her ribs. "She's not watching anything except us."

Wise grimaced and snatched up his cell.

"Ruiz," he said, holding his phone away from his face as if the receiver were infectious. "What in the name of Jehosephat are you doing? Watching paint peel? Turn and face the woods. If you expect to collect your deputy's paycheck..."

"Thank you," said Dave, glancing over his shoulder.

Rachel put on the calmest expression possible. She was outnumbered, outgunned, but not yet outsmarted.

"Okay," said Sheriff Wise, hanging up the phone. "That's summed up."

Something about the quick way the sheriff hung up irritated her. Maybe the casualness of it, as if there weren't information to milk from the call. Also she couldn't stand his antique colloquialisms. And maybe Aniceli Ruiz had noticed something—something she perhaps gave no importance to, yet might clear matters up—if only she had been carefully questioned, prodded.

"Listen here," Rachel said, taking the seat next to her husband, diagonally across from the sheriff, who was sipping coffee daintily, with one pinky out. "Phil, I'm used to you doing better police work than this. You can handle tough cases; I've seen you work. Why not go out there yourself, question someone, find some clues." She elbowed Dave, who seemed transfixed by soot on the light fixture overhead. "So why aren't there dogs? Or experts being flown in?" Rachel rubbed the cold flesh of her arms. "What happened to the FBI?"

Wise looked up from his coffee as the dining room ceiling groaned.

"We're a backwater county," he admitted, crossing his arms across a rounded abdomen.

"We don't have dogs. What's more, the state police won't be here again. The feds, either. Both figure the killer is settin' in the

jailhouse. The FBI don't believe the killin's down the street have anything to do with y'all."

"And why not?" shouted Rachel. The coffee smelled burnt. This was too much. She stifled a sneeze with her bent elbow. "Those idiots!"

"Cause they don't figure the murders lead to your house." Wise pitched his voice lower, softer, more measured. "The death in the first house looks like a robbery gone haywire. The second death like a former disgruntled employee, who, by the way, confessed to the two murders."

"What about the third and fourth?" said Dave, running a thumb between the table leaves.

"The boys died in Sharpsburg. Not here. And the state police and feds have a crazy man who confessed to the first two. Steve Dix. He's settin' in the Middlemarch Jailhouse now."

"But the others haven't been explained," said Dave, clawing hair off his brow.

"The feds and the state cops don't think the last murders belong in the same bushel basket," said Wise, shooting a glance out the window at Deputy Ruiz.

"But they must be connected!" Dave stood. Leaning over the table, he grasped the bottom ball of the chandelier between two fingers, examining the grime that had spread into a furry coat on every pendalogue and prism. "All the victims lived on this street. All the deaths happened twenty-nine and a half days apart. All the victims were males."

"True." The sheriff, too, glanced up at the lamp. "I don't figure we've caught the real killer any more than you do."

"What do you mean?" said Rachel. "Why do you think there's only one?" She thought of frog carcasses floating on the surface of an infected pond, trapped beneath a blanket of lily pads, Lev out there draining the blighted water into a spreading puddle.

"Didn't say nothin' 'bout that." Wise turned his attention from the chandelier, tipping his head, as if to concede some arcane point.

"You didn't say there was more than one," Rachel corrected.

"Don't know how many," he said, sliding his chair away from the table. "Might've been just one. A strong son-of-a-bitch with all that heavy furniture moved around."

“All the deaths occurred within three months,” said Dave. “And that poor crazy soul, Steve Dix. He might have a screw loose, but he’s worked all the farms in Zebulun.” He tapped the newspaper folded next to his empty mug. “The guy loves animals. Gentle as a lamb. Wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“The feds say the timin’s coincidence,” said Sheriff Wise, rising. “The only folks who believe there’s a connection are us.”

“Our neighbors believed it,” said Rachel.

“Except the neighbors.” He shrugged. “The wonder of it is that the Samples and the Creeds are still here. Skinnin’ lice for their tiler.”

“Which means?” said Rachel.

“Jes’ makin’ do.”

“No, they’re here because they’re smart.” Dave wiped his fingers on the newspaper and sniffed his thumb. “They know running away won’t stop it. They’re not in danger. Yet.”

“Funny thing about the neighbors,” said Wise. “They didn’t have any trouble believing it.

Most didn’t even wait for the third murder before they scattered.”

“The people who live here could sense something coming,” Dave said. “We sense it. It’ll be here before dawn tomorrow.”

“Because of the full moon.” Rachel rubbed her forearms as if to brush away the cold. “Yes. Because of the moon.”

Dave gathered the knives at the table. Examined them one by one and checked the sharpness of the blades with his wetted thumb. He drew blood, then licked it off. Rachel could smell it, coppery and thick. It churned her stomach. The warm, metallic odor felt like lead settling into her tight lungs.

“I sense it coming down the road too.” The sheriff walked to the window. “I think you’re right about running. Won’t do a bit o’ good. I’d rather go against a rusty nail I can see then get whacked up the side of the head with a hammer.”

“Sharpsburg,” said Rachel, looking down at the table. She felt a wheeze coming on. “The Harper children died—killed even though they were sent to Sharpsburg.”

The sheriff nodded once.

“In what way do you sense it coming?” asked Dave.

“I’ve dreamt it.” Wise’s dark eyes narrowed at a combine

harvester gliding down the road, quiet as a mouse. “Easy as that.”

“You’ve dreamt it,” repeated Rachel, incredulous. “Are you saying you wouldn’t be here or wouldn’t have your deputies on guard if you hadn’t dreamed about it?”

“That about sums it up.”

“And how do your dreams turn out?” said Rachel. She sat alone at the table now. A chill shot up her neck.

“Depends on what I’ve eaten for dinner,” he said.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she said.

Without the tinkling of glass or the falling of plaster, or a groan of the ceiling, the chandelier pulled away from the bronze medallion that held it, swayed briefly, threatening.

“My God!” Rachel put her hands over her head.

A thousand glitters, coalesced, in an instant, then the chandelier hurled downward, before Dave could reach her. It poured through the air, as a meteor, in a cascade of light. Then slammed into the middle of the dining room table with a crash of cymbals.

Crushing a lemony magnolia in its bud vase, it splattered into a thousand reflective pieces.

Shattered crystals everywhere—in pieces—like bugs of ice, infesting everything. Rachel’s hair, her blouse, the clothing of the men, the thick fur of Wolfie, who had crept out of the pantry.

A portent of disaster.

Rachel thought of the frogs, hundreds of them, buried in a mass grave. And of red tides. Of Ewell impaled on a stop sign, wrapped with chains. And of Petty, head cleaved, blood spurting on his carpet. Of the Harper boys, shot to death in Sharpsburg. Of childhood dreams she could never quite remember, but had left her terrified, nonetheless. These still lurked behind her fears. Now it seemed the stuff of her nightmares was finally about to arrive in her world, multifaceted globes, with straw for brains.



Dave held the dustpan while Rachel swept up the tar-covered shards of crystal and dumped them into a cardboard box. He closed it with duct tape while the sheriff held it between a chair back and his gut. Rachel wrote “chandelier pieces” and “Saturday April 7, 2014” with a black Sharpie. The two men carted the bulky container down to the musty basement, each step creaking like a bad knee as they descended. The vague reek of black mold drifted up the stairwell, Dave held the door open for the sheriff to come out first, then pulled it shut until the latch bolt clicked in its strike.

“Bad, huh?” Dave turned the brass mortise knob and slid the chain door fastener into its track. “The mold.”

The sheriff nodded. “Toxic stuff. And plenty of it. Best get that taken care of.”

Rachel sighed. As if the mold mattered. She took the bronze medallion into the butler’s pantry and tucked it behind a bag of Kibbles ‘n Bits. A sharp pain stabbed a thumb. “Ouch,” she said. A glass splinter had lodged there. She pulled it out and sucked the end of her thumb. Returning to the dining room with a wet rag spotted with blood, she cleaned the table of plaster dust.

A front door slammed. Where were Dave and the sheriff? Outside? Why?

A clamor rang from the pantry behind her. She ran to throw

open the door wider. All the shelves had fallen off their brackets. Pots and pans, umbrellas, garden tools were scattered over the oak floor. Her neck ached and shoulders contracted. She took a breath, stepped out, and slammed the door. "The pantry's collapsed," she shouted to the dog, now crouching in the corner of the dining room. She held up a hand. "Forget it. We're not picking all that shit up. Not now, not today. Just sayin'."

She cocked an ear to listen for the thump of running footsteps or whispers in the hallway upstairs. How could the boys sleep through that racket? No drum strokes, no guitar licks, no recitation of Zack's poetry on the landing. How could he and Leo ignore the crash of the chandelier, and Dave and Wise carrying away its broken skeleton? And the slamming door? And then the pandemonium in the pantry. And what about those footsteps earlier? Did the boys get up then go back to bed? It seemed unlikely.

She took the stairs, two at a time in stocking feet, to the landing. She paused there before the door to the closet where they kept spare tack, a tiny loveseat, and Zack's lava lamp collection. She had an impulse to enter, but pushed it aside. A butter yellow oval passed through the landing's astragal and illuminated a spot on the oak floor beside her, as if urging her on. She shivered once, turned and resumed climbing the stairs, then felt a hint of warmth as she gently pushed open Leo's door. He lay sleeping, one arm over his face shielding it from rays slanting between purple drapes. His desk had been cleaned off, the crayons all returned to the box. *What's gotten into him?* she thought. His many drumsticks were stuffed into a ceramic rainbow blowfish standing on its tail.

She crept to the next room where Zack's door was locked by its hook and eye. She could still crack it open about a half an inch. The locks had been a gesture toward privacy rather than a security measure. She could lift the hook with a credit card if she'd wanted to. Her son stirred, a dark halo of curls spread on the pillow. At fourteen he still had a sweetness about him, the rosy health of someone who'd not yet stopped growing. Once a body reached maturity, it started to die.

She shook her head to knock the thought loose from her brain. Zack's guitar leaned against the foot of the bed. Had he

gotten up, fearful of all the commotion, then locked the door? *My God*, she thought. For a moment feeling sorry she'd ever had children, only to have them taste human suffering. To face death, perhaps, as Zack's father had—shot dead before she'd even noticed she'd missed a period. Mike, her first husband, had been a general surgeon in the Navy stationed in Iraq while Rachel was still a resident. By the time her cardiology fellowship started, she'd been a pregnant widow, broken-hearted.

She sneaked back down the short flight of stairs to the landing, hoping the boys would sleep a good long while. She stopped and leaned over the railing. From there she could gaze over the foyer and through the transom above the front door. It gave a perfect view of an SUV, with U-Haul attached, pulling out from across the street. Even the hardy, no-nonsense Kellams were leaving town.

She passed the two men who had returned to the shiny, dented, mahogany dining table. They sat with arms crossed, staring at the hole in the ceiling, electrical cords dangling like squid tentacles. Taking turns saying "Jesus," or "How could—?" and "But it makes no sense." Then clamming up without finishing a sentence.

She went back in the kitchen to prepare her mother's breakfast. A stash of mini Mr. Goodbars was hidden in a spare teapot. She stuffed three into her mouth and let them melt, and slowly swallowed the chocolate juice, saving the peanuts for last. She stuffed a few packets into her pockets for later.

Soon, fresh eggs from the spotted-brown dozen the boys had collected the day before were sizzling in the skillet between two slices of soy bacon. She slid it all onto a platter from her mother's favorite set, porcelain plates with a raised gilded rim. She twisted an orange slice into a floweret garnish, folded a burgundy linen napkin to make a triangular pocket, then shook a can of starch and spritzed the folds, as if spraying Aqua Net on a spit-curl. She slipped the silverware in and carefully arranged it all on a bed tray, singing phrases from "Sweeney Todd," trying to block out the drone of Dave and the sheriff who'd returned to the dining room, and were arguing again. This time about the level of Dave's participation in the investigation.

Of course, her own analysis began when she was the medical examiner for H.V. Ewell, impaled on a stop sign in the middle of his living room. She'd poured over the topographical maps of Zebulon, every inch of them. The attack will come from the east. And plus, Rachel knew she was the only one who understood that the uprooted stop sign meant, ironically, the killer had no intention of stopping. Let's face it, she was the smartest person in the room. And not happy about that, at all.

"Damn!" Rachel dropped a roll of paper towels then bent over to pick it up under the butcher block. "Ew." She went to the sink and dampened several, then mopped up a cluster of dead flies, tossed the mess into the trash, and washed her hands. After that, she laid a paper towel over the food to keep the black flies off—flies also swarmed dead things. Rachel left by the back door.

Stepping over the scattered greenish droppings of chickens and guinea hens, she reached the cottage and knocked on the red door. Once a garage, now her mother's stone abode, it was fronted by a row of shuttered windows and blooming drifts of yellow and white jonquils. When they'd shared the main house, Beatrice had demanded her own "wing." Once the west side had been redesigned to accommodate this, she'd changed her mind. "All the loud rock 'n' roll those boys play," she'd complained. "Just put me in the garage with the rest of the junkers. Don't worry, you two, I'll pay for it." And she had.

Her garden beds were tended by Lev, who was at the moment draining the pond and glancing occasionally at the woods of the bordering north pasture. Maybe to catch a glimpse of Ruiz. He lifted a hand as Rachel stood waiting for her mother's greeting.

"Entrez-vous!" called Beatrice at last.

She turned the doorknob and shouldered her way in. As always, Indian sage was in the air. A CD droned the mantra her mother used to make herself "peaceful." Over the headboard hung an icon of Jesus and Mary. The ceiling over the bed displayed an astrology chart of the wheel of heaven Beatrice had acquired on an archeological trip to Timbuktu. A six-foot tapestry of the tree of life covered the wall adjacent to the bed. Scattered over the nightstands and open dresser drawers were crystal balls, altar bells, white candles in jars painted with

various saints. And Rachel's least favorite—a handmade Spirit board of maple, inlaid with the usual letters, but also charms and sacred symbols: lovebirds, frogs, an elephant, a horseshoe, the number seven, and something resembling a swastika in one corner. *Good God*, she thought. Her cheeks tingled.

“Hello, Mother.” She stood holding the tray, waiting. “What is that thing on the board?”

“Thing?” said her mother “You mean the ancient symbol of protection and auspiciousness?”

“The swastika! God, Mom, grandpa was Jewish.” She carried the tray into the cottage's small studio, an area crowded with a television, stereo system, computer and printer, and lattice-back chairs. Two walking canes lay on the bed, wooden shafts crossed, crooks facing each other, forming a long, narrow heart shape on a white pillow.

“You're a half hour late,” Beatricia chided. “And that's not a swastika. It's a tetraskelion. An *Om* symbol sits above it. And at the top, a trident. The combination of ancient symbols bestows extreme protection against negative energy.”

Rachel rolled her eyes, amazed she'd only been held up thirty minutes by Wise's tardiness and the chandelier's crash. She hurried to load the plate and orange juice onto a bedside tray-stand.

Beatricia pulled herself up to a sitting position. “I hope the eggs are store-bought.” She poked with the fork at a red dot in one yoke. “I prefer unfertilized eggs. Is that tofu, or TVP?”

“Free-range,” said Rachel. “You know those are the only kind we eat.”

“Then they'll have to do,” Beatricia sighed.

Rachel loved her mother, really. But she'd slowly grown tired of, then horrified by, the long slow process of her dying. First, three heart attacks. Then, her worsening neuropathy. Beatricia, who had in her twenties been a figure skater in *The Ice Capades*, dancing the role of Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*, now fell whenever she tried to walk without a pair of canes. Then had come her time of seeing ghosts, particularly Rachel's father. Followed by increasing episodes of shortness of breath over the past three months. Which, in turn, had precipitated bouts of compulsive, Tourette-ish spelling, during which she would utter

“N-U-N-O” over and over. It made no sense.

“Want to try to walk today?” said Rachel brightly. “I’ll get your tank.”

“Forget the oxygen,” said Beatricia. “What’s going on?” She crooked a dainty pinky as she sipped juice. “Some men just walked by my window.”

“Only Dave and Lev.”

“No. These were in uniform. Good-looking.”

“Nothing’s going on, Mother. It’s just an ordinary day.”

Beatricia shook her head. “I wonder if the daffodils survived. There was hoarfrost again on my window this morning.”

“No, there wasn’t. It’s spring. I told you that yesterday.”

“Well, the panes were coated with ice crystals.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. It must’ve been dew.”

“It was ice.”

Rachel frowned. “I’m sorry, no.”

Beatricia’s face crumpled. She started to cry.

Rachel ground her teeth. When her mother cried she looked like a helpless old woman. Her eyes creased and drooped until her whole face seemed to be sliding to her chin. She’d always been such an arrogant, gorgeous woman, with black hair and dark eyes, too beautiful to be denied all her whims and eccentricities. And she was beautiful still—until she cried.

Rachel turned away and pulled the heavy green velvet curtains closed. They made a rustling noise, like something small scuttling in the underbrush. She dialed down the volume on the stereo. “Mind if I turn it off?” She waited for an answer. But as she’d learned early in life, no answer is also an answer.

She walked back to the bed where Bea sat on the edge, still waiting. Rachel slid the rest of the silverware out and laid it next to the plate. She unfolded the starched napkin and tied it around her mother’s thin, corded neck.

“Before the beginning, God was one and non-dual,” said Beatricia. “It thought, ‘May I become many.’ This caused a vibration, which became sound, and this sound was ‘Ommm.’ The big bang—you’ve heard of that, my dear—was set in motion. Things were very dense and hot back then, dear.” She tittered. “But turn it off if you wish to.”

Rachel stomped over to the stereo and punched the button.

She winced at a fleeting, lancinating pain in one ear. A smell of iron and taste of steel that seemed to come from nowhere made her gag as though she'd been sucking on a cheap metal spoon all day. Feelings had become flavors and odors and a burn in her stomach. The taste of her own growing panic.

"What's wrong, dear?"

"Nothing." She took a slow deep breath through her nose, inhaling the acrid scent of burning pitch. Ugh. She hated campfires, and camping in general.

"What do you mean nothing?" Beatrice was staring at a gap where the twin drapes didn't quite meet. "Nothing' has always been 'something' ever since you were three. Those night terrors, for instance."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Fine." Bea paused to take a sip of juice. "Maybe later." Her eyes met Rachel's and held them. "Your soul is as restless as any dead spirit's."

"What?" Every word her mother said seemed vital, but she tried to remain cool and skeptical. She needed to hold herself together for her kids.

"You're bothered by something," said Beatrice, cutting up a slice of egg with one side of the sterling fork. "Got any ketchup?"

"No ketchup. Never ketchup. Why, do I look disturbed?"

"Not at all. You're the very picture of rational, serene deportment. My congratulations. But you'll crack as soon as you leave this room. Don't bother to deny it." She swallowed. "And we both know this isn't just another day."

"Oh," said Rachel, trying to hide her annoyance at her mother's still-sharp perception. "Then perhaps you can tell me what's going on, and how everything will turn out."

"Haven't a clue," said Beatrice. "I'm not in the house, but confined here. Where the only thing truly open to me is the emotional electricity of your brain..."

"You're not confined. You wanted this place." She sat at the foot of the bed, sinking into memory foam. So, I'm simmering inside and attempting to conceal it from you?"

"Yes, clearly."

"That's a very egocentric position, Mother. To assume I'm spending all my time and energy to hide something from you."

“I’m assuming nothing. Merely reading.”

“Stop imagining you can see my aura. That really is enraging.”

“Oh my!” Beatrice sipped coffee, still extending the pinky.

“It is worse than I thought.

You really must tell me what’s going on.”

“And if I did,” said Rachel, looking away from her mother’s face, to where red and white pansies swayed in window boxes. “What good would it do? You can’t help. It would only worry you. But I’ll say something to put you at ease.” She patted her mother’s leg beneath the covers. “We do have a problem on the farm, but also plenty of help to deal with it. It’ll be over by tomorrow morning. I can promise you that.”

“Tell me about it, Rachel.”

“No.” She rubbed her forehead. “If I did, Dr. Pasquale would kill me. Really, Mom, think of your heart—and my head. I have to work with the man at SGH.” She motioned toward the kitchen. “So, is that enough breakfast? I could go get a second helping.”

“It’s plenty, Rachel.” Beatrice sighed. “When you’re young, they step on your fingers,” she murmured. “When you’re old, they step on your heart.”

Laughter surged up against Rachel’s diaphragm. She tried to swallow it back down, but it burst from her mouth.

Beatrice cursed and looked away.

Rachel picked up the breakfast tray from her mother’s bedside table. Eyes still tearing, but the laughter was gone.

“Come back if you change your mind,” Beatrice said. “I’ll just sit here in the dark, figuratively speaking. I remember Deputy Crockett. He’s on the right track with the Dalai Lama. But who are those two other deputies? The Haitian and the Hispanic woman?”

“They were both your students at Kingston Prep. They’re...”

“Don’t tell me. I need a real puzzle. I’m tired of Sudoku.”

“Good. Keep your brain active. And don’t believe everything you see.”

Ewe shrubs slapped the windowpanes in the breeze. Rachel got another whiff of burning leaves on salt-tinged air. A little like her grandmother’s hand-rolled cigarettes.

“Why don’t you get out of my room and leave me alone?” Beatrice snapped.

“All right, I will.” Rachel wiped off the folding tray, then tucked it beside the refrigerator. She flinched when a motorcycle engine roared down Burnt Chestnut, then trailed away.

“So, Mom? Have you felt cold today?”

“No, Rachel. I haven’t. The panes were frozen on the outside, yes. But of course it’s not coming here. Not so early.”

“What’re you talking about? What’s not coming here?”

“It’s looking for something, but won’t come until dark.” Beatrice folded her arms on top of the bedspread, and looked up at her Tree of Life tapestry. “It’s coming back by the power of animal magnetism.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You have a more immediate concern.” Beatrice tapped the bedspread with one finger. “There’s already something else inside your house.”

“Hmm. I see.” Rachel kissed her mother’s forehead. Beatrice’s intuition was powerful as Merlin’s wand, but she was always imagining things. She was positive that a killer, or killers, was coming.

Rachel pulled the cottage door shut behind her. The spring day had turned lush, summer-ripe. Near the bed of delicately blue vinca that Wolfie used as his private urinal, cup-shaped crocuses grew, their yellow and purple and white-striped leaves forming a city of tiny cradles. Long-armed forsythia undulated in a breeze that felt healing. Rachel’s spirits lifted. She felt the absence of immediate danger, at least for now. She dashed back across the clamshell driveway, sure her mother was wrong about something being in the house already. Wait—was there something flickering by an upstairs window? In an instant, the light was gone.

Nijinsky lay asleep just behind the tire of the sheriff’s patrol car. On his back, sweet gray face lifted to catch the sun.

“Come on, Jinksy, let’s eat.” Rachel leaned to pet him. “Kitty, Kitty!” When the cat didn’t move, “Jinks! Wake up. Catnip. Catnip time!” She froze, hand hovering over his head.

“Please, Jinks.” Her knees locked. She couldn’t touch him.

She closed her eyes and drew a breath. If she cried her face would become creased and fallen. No way could she hide that from Dave and the boys.

She touched Nijinsky's side with the toe of her boot. Then knelt and stroked him. She couldn't help crying, her chest throbbing hard. It felt like she was dying, sinking deep into the earth with a great weight tied to her ankles.

Nijinsky felt soft, so death had been recent. But he was colder than the ambient temperature. But how could that be? She sat cross-legged on the driveway and held him in her lap, and heaved a final sigh. She tilted his head, tears again blinding her, and cried out when blood suddenly gushed from his left ear.

"Dave," she screamed.

The porch door slammed, footsteps pounded toward her—first Dave's, then the heavier tread of the sheriff. Behind them, Lev stepped quickly.

Lev took Nijinsky from her arms, his steady gaze glassy. Sad, yet earnest. "He'll lie down to pleasant dreams." He set his jaw and wrapped the cat in an old horse blanket that'd been left on the porch.

"Jesus." Dave was pale as a ghost in sunlight. He wrapped his arms around Rachel who sobbed into his shirt.

The cat nestled in Lev's arms. Rachel broke away and stroked him. A small but monstrous injustice, on a day when all their lives were threatened. Or an omen? A first blow against her household.

She backed away. "Thanks, Lev. I..." She ought to ask about any disturbances at the barn, but just stood, mouth open, beside Dave. Lev turned away, his eyes red with anguish as he carried the cat away.

The horse blanket had belonged to Aristino, dead one year now. How she wanted him back.

The sheriff stepped in, mumbling condolences neither Rachel nor Dave heard.



I can see how it looks, but I didn't kill your cat." Phil Wise sat on the slatted porch swing, anchoring it with braced black engineer boots. The swing didn't move.

Rachel perched on the edge of an adjacent glider, Dave beside her, motionless and silent. The side porch was paved with brick, half-screened to the north and east by blackberry vines. But today, its floor seemed to be sinking, following a gentle slope toward the steps. She wanted to speak, to say how much she loved Dave, but words lay trapped in her mind. She'd never felt this anxious before, except after one of her old, recurring night terrors. The wind chimes released shivers of notes, stopped, resumed.

Nine-year-old Leo was awake. Drum rolls rattled from his room upstairs, ghost notes filling the pauses, dead space punctuated by a crash of cymbals. The noise would wake his older brother. Then Zack would plug into his amp, skipping up and down chord progressions. Like any other normal, noisy day, Rachel thought. But not.

"Nijinsky died of head trauma." She turned toward Wise. "He was lying beside the rear tire of your car. It probably delivered the fatal blow."

Dave sighed heavily.

"If I'd run over the cat, the body'd be crushed," the sheriff

mumbled, looking up at the sky-blue ceiling of the porch as if concerned the swing's chains would give way.

"We've got to consider everything," Dave looked down at his hands, then over at the barn. Lev was leading one of the horses out.

Rachel frowned. "What does that mean?"

"When you got out of the car," Dave said to Phil, "Nijinsky wasn't there."

"You could've missed seeing him," said Rachel, fingers locking with such force she could crack a walnut.

"I don't think so." Dave looked at her hands, still clutched in her lap. "I don't think the cat was near the car. So—"

"His head hit the bumper. He died by the back tire," she insisted.

"I would've heard something," said the sheriff. "Felt a bump."

"What're you saying? What are both of you saying?" Her face grew hot. She glared first at Wise, then Dave. "That someone killed the cat and set his body by the car, in broad daylight?"

"Why didn't you notice him before, when you went out to Bea's cottage?" asked Wise.

"I don't know." She forced her hands apart and looked into Wise's eyes. "Find the assassin, arrest him. I'm not the sheriff. You are."

And a miserable specimen at that, she thought. Look at him, sitting there like Jabba the Hutt, about to break our swing and get us all goddamn killed.

Over the waistband of her jeans she gave her flesh a little squeeze. Her first husband, Mike, had died in a missile strike on an Iraqi hospital. She'd ballooned up to over two hundred pounds, carrying Zack. Fat still scared her. A virus she'd once contracted, beaten, and survived. But it lay waiting to re-infect. She stood to go find chocolate, changed her mind and sat back down, then reached up under her shirt again, feeling reassured by the washboard strength of her abs under the small roll of fat. Still, a handful of M&M's would feel good, the candy coating melting in her mouth...

She spied the rectangular bulge of a cigarette pack in the sheriff's breast pocket. "Like one?" he said.

“Well...I would.” She chewed her lip. “But I quit a long time ago.”

“Believe I’ll quit as well. These things ain’t doin’ me a bit of good.” Wise took out the Marlborough lights, walked across the lawn to the trashcan set out by the driveway and tossed the pack in. By the time he’d climbed the porch steps, he was out of breath.

As the county medical examiner, she’d often accompanied him to the scene when there was a suspicious death. He always huffed and puffed and sweated walking around crime scenes, then usually sat on the nearest chair while she examined the bodies.

“Maybe you should check out the cat, too,” she said. “Look for, I don’t know—some sort of evidence.”

Phil Wise knew he hadn’t killed the damn cat. But maybe Rachel was on to something about its death. An open mind was important in every investigation. He sensed her disdain for him, even though he assumed they’d had a good working relationship up to now. She was always respectful. In fact, he liked her very much. Whenever called in to view corpses left by homicides, suicides, or accidents, she’d behaved professionally, with great compassion.

“Poor boy” or “poor girl” she always said, almost as a mantra, as she examined the bodies and called out her observations. “No blood in the heart; lungs filled with fluid; broken shoulder blade; torso twisted; ruptured globes.”

Sometimes she seemed close to tears; an endearing quality. Maybe she had a gift for them, like Padre Pio, who Rachel’d said had filled vases with tears of compassion.

The sheriff let his swing rock back and forth, set into motion by her prompt. “You’re right. I oughta try to determine how he died. We didn’t look all that close.”

“Check the side away from the bleeding ear,” Rachel said. “A blow knocks the brain to the opposite side of the skull.”

“Okey dokey,” said the sheriff. “I’ll call if I need any help.”

He heaved up from the swing and walked out to the barn to find Lev, fishing a cigarette from inside his pocket, and realizing he’d quit ten minutes ago.

He’d been a forensic hero in the past. He would be a hero again.

Two years before, Della Pruitt had used her husband's deer rifle to shoot him. With a folding knife, Phil had dug out a bullet embedded in a tree in the couple's backyard. "Target practice, months ago," Mrs. Pruitt had explained.

He'd then located a bloodied chain in the corner crib.

"Sometimes I use a chainsaw to turn a buck into steaks," she maintained. She'd attempted to clean it with soap and water. But he'd found a pasty brown residue, which he'd sent to the forensic DNA department in Richmond. Bingo. Later, a suitcase had floated to shore, discovered by a seventeen-year-old surfer at Virginia Beach.

The Samsonite had contained human remains. The blood sample from the chain saw matched the DNA in the shoe compartment. A bullet embedded in the decomposing spleen semi-preserved by salt water had matched the one he had dug out of the tree bark with his Swiss Army knife.

That case had made all the state newspapers. "Big time!" he whispered. This case would not defeat him either.

"Hope Lev hasn't buried the cat yet." Dave shook his head and looked down. "God, I hope it was the car that hit Jinx. I mean, so he didn't suffer."

Rachel took a hard look at her husband. The worry in his forehead, the stress in the knotty muscles of his shoulders. The circulatory waves of the prominent arteries of his neck.

She looked down at the Mr. Goodbar mini, tore it from its wrapper and tossed it into her mouth.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way," he said.

They glanced at each other, then away, as if each was embarrassed to see fear in the other. A breeze was stirring. The chickens scratching in the barnyard were cackling, the roosters competing for the loudest crow. A guinea hen stared transfixed at its reflection in a hubcap of the cruiser. Zack was playing "Master of the Puppets" on his favorite Ibanez guitar, the distortion turned way up, notes leaking between the spaces of the upstairs windows, dripping like rain.

"The sheriff's an idiot," said Rachel. "He only believes we're in danger because he had a fucking dream."

"Well, we weren't so smart, either," he said. "Thinking the neighbors left only because they sensed danger. That's not true."

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Everyone’s being stupid.”

“They left because all the murders occurred at a full moon,” said Dave. “Death is coming straight down the street, people falling like dominoes. They were freaked out by all the funerals. A burial drives home the reality of death. The state police didn’t go to them.”

He turned away toward the quiet emptiness of Burnt Chestnut Road. Down the street a car backfired. Its engine roared. “It’s out there, Rachel. The murderer.”

“It? Murderer or murderers?” said Rachel.

Dave shrugged. “Natural or supernatural?”

“Goddamn it, don’t say things like that to me. I don’t want to hear another word.”

“I don’t like you cursing at me,” he said.

“Likewise.”

“I’m not cursing at you.”

“Let’s take a minute and pray for our family,” Rachel said. “For the children.”

“Okay. Good idea as any. Together or separate?”

Her hand groped for his. Their fingers wove together. “Let’s each say our own.” She whispered a silent prayer for protection, then opened her eyes, still holding his hand. His lips were still moving. She closed her eyes again and prayed the bad guys would just pass by. Her hands were cramping and Dave’s grew clammy. She let them slip apart.

“I’ll kill anyone who threatens us.” She remembered she’d left her rifle inside.

He nodded. “I used to wonder if I could ever do that. If it came right down to it. Now I know. I would.”

Through the blackberry vines she saw the sheriff walking back to the porch, red in the face, swinging his arms as if hiking up a deep slope. “Here comes our expert.”

Wise climbed up the steps, wiped sweat from his face with an impeccable white hankie initialed with green embroidery; dropped himself onto the swing. The hooks in the porch ceiling beam screeched and groaned.

“Well,” he said, after a pause. “Maybe you better take a look at the cat yourself.”

“Why?”

“There ain’t a mark on him. I went over every furry inch and couldn’t find a scratch, not a bump, not one. Even checked for poison, best I could. No foam in the mouth, no chemical smell. Nothing in the urine.”

“What toxin would make him bleed from the ear?” said Rachel. “Except Coumadin, maybe. Blood thinners. Don’t have any of those lying around. Besides, he’d be bleeding from everywhere.”

“I don’t know of anything else that would make him bleed, either,” said the sheriff. “Not that fast. Maybe aspirin or phenylbutazone, but they taste like shit. A cat wouldn’t eat ’em. A dog, sure.”

“Trauma,” said Rachel. “But...not your car.” She swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Phil tipped his head. “I think I’ll set up a small camera in the house if you don’t mind.” He slapped his knees and stood. His pants were so perfectly starched; it looked like God had done the pressing. “Might record a disturbance we’d miss. Wish we had four hi-8s so we could set one up each side of the house.”

The rubber soles of his boots squeaked as he stepped off the porch on the way to the Crown Victoria.

“Suit yourself. But I think it’s silly,” Rachel called after him.

“I’m jes’ guessin’,” said the sheriff, turning around. “You might think it’s funny. But, if somethin’ attacks y’all here, it’s gonna come from the north pasture. Got Deputy Ruiz lookin’ over it, but somethin’ might happen that she can’t see.”

Rachel understood an investigator feeling his way through a case, but Sheriff Wise was pulling his guesses from dreams. “It’s going to come from the east.”

The sheriff shook his head. “The north. It’ll come the easiest way, and when it comes, we might as well record it. Some sort of disturbance, maybe.”

Dave shifted in the swing, causing it to wobble. The chain bolts creaked in the ceiling above them.

“A disturbance?” Rachel leaned forward. “Sheriff Wise, I can’t believe a man like you, a thinking man, believes in ghosts and vengeful spirits. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Doc,” said Wise. “Thanks for askin’. I got nothin’ to say about it, right now. But I got this-here equipment

in the car. Might as well use it.”

Rachel felt a catch in her side. She was suddenly breathless from a pain that shot through her left flank. “I’m bleeding,” she mumbled to Dave. “Guess I’m early.”

“Goddamn it.” Dave paced across the porch, wringing his hands. “I need to saddle a horse and take a good look at those woods, like you say. Need to look at the main trails, the back trails, and squeeze through those game trails. We’ll find something out there. It won’t take an hour. I’m that sure.”

She went inside to the bathroom, found a box of tampons. It felt as if layers of an icy membrane were melting, draining her defenses, whatever was left of her coolness. As if a dam inside her had broken, and the blood would pour and pour until it ended in coagulated blackness. Would her bleeding attract the killer—assuming there was just one? Could he smell it like copper, like ozone in air already tainted by an ignited burn pile? Surely, it wasn’t fire the murderer was after. It was blood. And that didn’t make her feel one bit better.

She pressed a hand to her abdomen as a cramp doubled her over.



Most mornings, by the time Zack had his toothbrush loaded, Wolfie was sitting just inside the bathroom, sweeping the stone floor with his hyperactive tail. But today, there was something inhospitable in the air. Zack felt it too.

He whistled and headed down the stairs. “Wolfie! Here boy!”

The Dachshund lay on his blue velveteen dog bed in the pantry, nose tucked under a paw, eyebrows twitching. Normally, he would listen to Zack and Leo play their instruments then leave his bed early to shadow them for hours. But this morning, his rise to Zack’s call seemed lame and halting.

Rachel was talking and clattering dishes in the dining room. Something about her voice kept the dog cowering in the pantry.

“He’s freaked out by all this noise, Mom,” Zack said with a laugh. “Chillax.”

“Good morning to you, too, Zack.”

Zack smelled Oreos on her breath when she kissed his cheek, wiping her hands on a towel. She tossed the rag onto the kitchen counter and headed outside to join a muffled conversation between Dave and Sheriff Wise.

Zack went to sit in the pantry on the dog’s bed, cup of tea in hand. He scooped Wolfie into his lap, humming, rubbing the dog’s soft underbelly. The droopy wiener dog lay limp as Zack got up and carried him from the pantry and up the long stairway

to where Leo's drums pounded out a three-beat rhythm, a waltz, only louder and faster.

Zack paused at the door on the landing, but it was closed. So he went up another flight to his room. One wall had been painted with wild cats—lions, tigers, and panthers—with the help of his stepdad, against a forest-green background. Zack sat on the bed and picked up his guitar to accompany Leo's performance. He joined the three-beat rhythm melded into a heavy metal version of a Michael Jackson song about lost children.

Today was the big day. No one had told Leo about the murders; he was only nine years old. But Zack had seen the story in the local newspaper. Heard it from his friends. He'd read of the murders avidly, inhaling every breathy whisper—all the grisly details, the odd but delicious fact they'd occurred only on nights with a full moon. The funerals hadn't fazed him. The spirits of the dead were already gone, Isabel had told him. Into the light.

He searched within for traces of anxiety. Only he wasn't afraid. After all, there were three deputies, one of them goddess-pretty; another, a Haitian; a long-legged one named Crockett; one sheriff; Lev; a stepfather; and his mother to protect him. As well as Isabel, and a lot of guns. Also, one ferocious dachshund. He smiled at that. A pint-sized milk-chocolate cupcake that never barked.

But where were his nun-chucks?

He'd left them on the bureau, but they weren't there. Only sheet music and a pile of guitar picks. The big green pick with a frog printed on it he'd caught as it flew through the air at a Bucket Head concert. His lucky pick. He strung it back on its chain which he clasped behind his neck. He looked in the bureau drawers, pawed through the pile of jeans and T-shirts in the corner. No nun-chucks. Maybe Leo had them, but doubtful. They were both martial arts students, but his brother's interest didn't extend to hand weapons—except for swords.

"Shit!" Zack stood in the middle of his room, arms crossed, wondering how it had become so orderly overnight, and was now so messy. His mother might've cleaned it while he slept. She was a compulsive tidier when nervous. But who'd messed it up? Leo, of course. But so fast?

Zack flung off his pajamas and tossed them onto a pile. He pulled on jeans and a black shirt, catching the motion in the mirror above the bureau. He looked a little like his mother—black hair, dark green eyes, olive skin. His face was beginning to look sort of like a man's, except for baby-fat cheeks, and no scars. He badly wanted a scar.

“Damn it.” Where were those nun-chucks? He'd been hungry, but now the need for steaming waffles disappeared, leaving only the hunger to hold the nun-chucks in his hands. To feel their weight. He wasn't afraid. Nothing bad would ever happen to him. But he'd feel more prepared if the nun-chucks had been in their usual place on the bureau, waiting to be stuffed into the right-hand pocket of his jeans.

He stomped down the long stairway toward the foyer, stopping on the landing again, Wolfie trailing behind him. Always coolness there, even in summer. Dave had replaced the old, loose, landing window, but the coolness remained. Dave—he couldn't bring himself to call his stepfather Dad—always said the damp of the basement climbed the timbers of a shaft beneath the stairs and chilled the worn oak floorboards. *He was wrong.*

Zack smiled at the thought.

Ghosts. But not a big deal. Zack knew one of them—a girl. A beautiful slip of a girl with long blond hair and porcelain skin. She was always dressed in diaphanous white. Zack was mesmerized by her budding breasts and the way she crossed her legs. She'd been coming for months to sit on the sofa on the landing or the tiny loveseat in its closet he'd set up as a study. Sometimes, she came to his bed, floating an inch above the floor. They'd discovered many things together—sex being one of them. Isabel had giggled when he'd zipped open a condom wrapper. Could a ghost have a baby? Neither Zack nor Isabel knew.

He sat down on the smoke-blue velvet sofa his mother called “the vapors couch.” The voices of Dave and Rachel, and some other guy drifted up from the porch. Who would join him here? Would old Mr. Nelson, a famous Zebulon ghost, finally show up? Or would it be the girl? He hoped for Isabel. He could complain to her without receiving stern advice or smothering worry.

Isabel had been fifteen when she'd died during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, but had never left the house. There was

something she had to do, but didn't know what. She was waiting.

When he complained about Dave, who always favored his natural son, Leo, Isabel would hold his hand, listening, sending a chill to his marrow. And a fever to kiss her cool, soft lips. It was as if he had a time machine. Sometimes he thought he could touch the Stone Age, if he wanted to. She was the proof of eternity and this notion had removed all fear of death from his heart.

Isabel stroked his arm when he talked about his biological father, whom he'd never met. A flight surgeon who'd lost his life trying to remove bullets from the abdomen of a wounded army colonel in Iraq. So if Zack could see and feel Isabel, why didn't his father come to him?

She always leaned her head on his shoulder and said, "Perhaps he's passed."

The velvet upholstery grew colder, but no one came. Not Mr. Nelson, not Isabel. He looked up at the ceiling. The swirls of paint were like white snakes slithering to the rhythm of cicadas humming on the roof. He knelt on the sofa and pressed his ear to the wall. The buzz of wings grew louder. Wolfie shook with pleasure. A light the blue of Isabel's eyes spread beneath the crack below the door until she rose from the glow, her face beautiful and clear in front of him.

Wolfie licked her hands when she touched him. In all the ghost stories Zack had read, dogs had barked like maniacs at a ghost's approach. Not Wolfie. Not for Isabel.

"I heard you calling." She sank onto the seat next to him, wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "You summoned me."

For the first time, instead of just sitting and waiting for her, he had summoned her. His heart demanded her to come. And she had.

Her cold lips pressed against his in a Velcro kiss, throwing a few green sparks. "Something's coming," she said.

"Who?" By now he was used to shivering while he held her. He'd learned to enjoy it. Like when the hair stands up on the back of your neck at a scary movie. "Old Mr. Nelson?"

"No. You still don't understand. He's not really here. Once you've gone into the light, you can't come back."

“Then, why does everyone still talk about him?”

She shrugged. “Because of the way he died.”

Zack had heard the story from his schoolmates. A gray-bearded soldier, Mr. Nelson had been shot in the leg during the Indian Wars and had gone crazy with laudanum and PTSD. He had lain trapped for a whole day under a mound of dead soldiers before he’d been found and brought to the old Zebulon tavern. Hours later, the tavern had caught fire as Mr. Nelson bled after the amputation of his leg. So he was carried outside into an ice storm, where he died, raving.

Zack believed the story, no matter what his mother had told him. He knew his house sat on the site of the old tavern. It was like one of those Indian burial ground movies. “What about the hauntings? Everyone’s heard of Nelson’s ghost.”

“He’s gone,” she insisted. “Aren’t you listening?”

“There really is no Mr. Nelson here at all?”

“I watched him pass,” she said. “He went into the light.”

Instead of waiting for her to make the first move, he lightly stroked her leg, sliding her dress to just above her knees. He tasted wine as he kissed her, like at communion. She kissed him again and again, their lips like magnets, Wolfie watching. The electricity slammed his head back into the mahogany scrollwork of the sofa.

“Ow!” He rubbed his neck. Her hair rose like silken ribbons in a breeze. He put his fingers into the misty corona that encircled her head. “How long will you stay?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes narrowed. She turned her head as if listening to some far away voice. “You must leave this house.” Her voice was raspy and tired.

“Wait. Why?”

She gazed into his eyes. The years that separated them, her death, her ghostliness—none of that mattered. He trusted her. Felt her love.

“No,” he said. “Leave? This house? I love you. You’re the reason I stay.”

She struggled out of their embrace. “You must leave Zebulon now. You and your family.”

“Isabel.” The bite of wine on his tongue had gone sour. His hands passed through her dissolving shadow as she melted into

a puddle of light and slipped back under the door. "Isabel. No, wait." He sat a moment, longing for her fingertips, her tongue, a brush of teeth, her breath, the velvet touch of her cascading curls. "Please, please come back," he whispered. "Isabel."

His head hurt. He slumped and pressed his eyes with both palms. Only the bar of light through the window behind the door showed in the space beneath it. He got up and twisted the knob. Sunlight shown through the wavy glass window onto rows of saddles on racks. Spare bridles hanging from hooks. The air was thick with the soapy smell of leather and glycerin. Tears pooled at the bottom of his closed throat. He shut the door and plopped back down on the sofa. The landing was warm now. Isabel wouldn't come back for a while.

He went downstairs, Wolfie stumbling at his heels.

Dave and his mother were usually out at the barn by the time Zack got up to fix his breakfast. But she was still sitting on the porch with Dave and Sheriff Wise. Why was the dining room wood stove lit and pumping out so much heat? His parents usually insisted they all keep warm by wearing layers of clothing, to save energy. The entire family could be hospitalized for nerdiness. But now—

When he went to the door to the side porch, his mother and Dave were sitting in the swing, rocking, looking toward the north pasture. Sheriff Wise was lumbering across the backyard toward Deputy Ruiz, famous among his friends for her tamales and the way she filled that uniform, particularly her trousers. She'd coached Zack's golf team last fall. She had Bette Davis eyes, except they were brown.

Whenever the deputy had bent over to scoop a golf ball from a cup, boys would put their hands over their hearts and stagger, pretending to faint.

"Good morning," said Rachel.

"The sheriff's going to ask Deputy Ruiz for a date," said Zack, stepping out onto the porch. "Cougar."

Dave turned away and toward Rachel. "Wise will give her hell for sitting on a log facing the house and not watching the woods," he said. "She's addicted to donut holes. I watched her scarf an entire bag in about five minutes, after a bagel sandwich. Wonder how she stays so thin."

“Exercise,” said Zack.

“She smokes,” said Dave.

“So?” said Zack. “It’s an electronic cigarette.”

“She’s got a kid’s metabolism,” said Rachel. “Wait till she has some children.”

“I can’t find my nun-chucks.” The door to the house opened behind him. Wolfie pushed his way out onto the porch and stood by Zack, staring at Rachel, head cocked.

“Stay here, boy.” She pointed to the welcome mat made of woven coconut fibers. He wagged his tail and settled down on the mat.

“Zack, I don’t know where your nun-chucks are,” said Dave. “I want you to go back inside the house and bring me the rifle on the dining room table.”

Zack hated that patronizing tone, the blaming tone, the one Dave always used when sending him off to do a chore that he could damn well do himself. He let his face go blank—the mask he used with any adult who tried to drill him for information or bend him to his will. If he didn’t obey at once, Dave would explode with accusations. The calmness was fake—a bad acting job. Dave was only a stepfather—he treated Leo better.

“But I need to tell Mom something.” Zack dropped his head. His curls fell forward draping over one eye. “Mr. Volcano,” he mumbled.

“What did you say to me?” said Dave.

“Nothing.” Zack whipped his hair back out of his face. Dave was always ready to spew lava.

Rachel reached down and put a hand on Wolfie’s head. “Go get the rifle, Zack.”

“I have to talk to you.”

“Later.”

“Now. It’s important.”

“No, Zack.”

He didn’t move. “I’m hungry.”

“Do it,” Rachel said. “Now, please.”

“Fuck it.” He turned and walked back inside, slamming the screen door. He opened it again. “By the way, Mom. We’d better leave Zebulon. Today. Before dark.”

• • •

At the edge of the north pasture, the sheriff waved and pointed toward the woods. Ruiz looked disgusted, got up, turned toward the trees, and sat back down on the stump again. She stuffed a wrinkled Krispy Kreme bag into her jacket. It was almost nine. The sun shone from the east over a broad meadow. The day was growing warmer, the morning breeze dying. Wise took out his handkerchief, wiped his neck and glared back toward the house. He spotted Lev and lifted a hand.

Lev was turning horses out onto a pale green field of fescue. He chewed on a long stalk of grass, leaned back against the barn, and tossed a greeting back across the field.

“I don’t want to see no more horse pucky, Ruiz,” said the sheriff. “Stay sharp. Eyes open, mouth shut.”

He looked back at Lev, who was rocking on his heels, arms crossed, still sucking on the stalk.

Ruiz stood and turned, facing away from the house. She patted her pockets and pulled out a real pack of cigarettes.

Wise cupped his hands around his mouth. “And no smoking!” He shook his head and turned again, heading back in large, determined strides that ate up the field. “What kinda deputy smokes around horses?” he mumbled.



Dave leaned forward in the rocker, mouth open, staring at his stepson.

“I can’t find the rifle,” Zack said, his face settling into that glacial blandness again—the expression that meant he was pissed off. Well, tough shit.

“What do you mean, you can’t find it?” Dave turned his palms up. “One’s on the dining room table. The other’s leaning in the corner next to the china hutch.”

Zack shrugged. “They’re not there now.” Leo’s drumming bled away into silence.

Dave clenched his fists. The boy always opposed him. He usually let it slide, but not today. He wanted to shake him by the shoulders, force him to admit they were in the dining room, but that would do no good. A lecture wouldn’t help, either.

“Follow me.” He yanked open the porch door and stalked into the dining room. His gaze immediately fixed on the table.

No rifle there. Nor was Rachel’s propped in the corner.

“Jesus Christ!” said Dave. He heard her clomp into the dining room behind him. Her footsteps stopped, and she gasped.

“I told you,” Zack said, stepping inside, Wolfgang behind him. “Where are they?” she said. Wolfie whined and ran for the pantry.

“Don’t panic,” Dave said, holding up a hand. “There’s a

reason for this.” He lowered his voice. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Work as a family and find both of the guns. No one’s going to get excited. Leo might’ve come down and moved them. Something else might’ve happened. Something reasonable.”

“Well, I didn’t hide them,” said Zack. “They just were gone.”

“I didn’t say you did.” He gave Zack a long look.

The boy stared back, cast a glance downward, then looked up from under his eyelashes.

Dave put a hand on Rachel’s waist. He wanted to pull her to him and kiss her. Bad timing. The rigid set of her shoulders told him she was ready to blow.

Rachel fumed and ate another candy bar, this time fast. Leo couldn’t have moved the rifles. He’d been upstairs drumming while everyone else was on the porch. Zack had said he hadn’t moved them, so he probably hadn’t. Maybe she or Dave had done it, unthinking. So afraid they’d become unaware, then forgotten about it. At the hospital, she’d observed fugue states, in which patients didn’t know what they were doing from one minute to the next. Gone, ego-less, not at home.

Her hands were trembling. Did she remember the dead cat? Yes. The talk with the sheriff? Yes. But what had she forgotten? No test for that except to talk to her husband, go over every detail they could both pull up from memory. Maybe she was suffering from a persecutory delusion.

“Absurd,” she mumbled. But then, the whole thing was absurd. The horrific murders, the eternal waiting, the sheriff out in the north pasture yelling at a sexy, donut-addicted smoking deputy.

She could read Dave’s face well enough to see he’d lost confidence in himself too—in his own interpretation of reality. The lines on his forehead deepened. Dark shadows encircled his eyes.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s do this in an orderly fashion. Rachel, go into the kitchen. See if the rifles are there. Zack, check upstairs in case Leo carried them to one of the bedrooms. I’ll check out the living room and foyer.”

Rachel bit her lip. She didn’t want to go into the kitchen alone. It seemed an alien place where someone or something might be waiting. The creaky floor was slanted enough for

a marble to roll.

“I’m not going back upstairs.” Zack’s voice cracked. “I don’t want to.”

“All right,” said Dave. “We’ll look together.”

“No!” said Zack, walking away.

Rachel followed Zack back to the porch. Just as he stepped out, Leo resumed drumming upstairs. Behind the beats of the double-bass pedal, she heard a rushing of water, as if she’d left the shower on—the one that’d soaked her in blood a few hours before.

“Oh, God.” She touched Zack’s back and, twisting away, ran past Dave who was inspecting the items in the dining room. She tore up the stairs, stumbling once, arriving breathless in Leo’s room. She felt a breeze on her neck, as if she were being followed.

Leo finished a long roll and crashed the cymbals.

“What’s the matter, Mom?” He looked up from the Ringo Starr kit around which his room was arranged.

She dropped onto Leo’s bed, unable to speak. Still sitting there, she kicked the door shut, as if to push out whatever she’d imagined was pursuing her.

Leo’s voice came toward her as if from a distance. “Where’s Zack?”

“Ummh...pulling ivy.” Her mind flew to her older son. She imagined him in the garden, green tendrils circling his ankles. The blackberry bushes closing in, inch by inch. The empty porch swing swaying, as if pushed by an invisible hand.

She had to keep track of her family. To monitor everyone’s whereabouts, at all times. It wouldn’t do to have Leo in his room, Zack in the yard, and Dave scurrying around, looking for rifles—she had to keep things together.

From the cellar came the noise of a water pump turning on and off, moans of the joists, breezes whispering through windows left open, carrying that familiar campfire scent.

“Let’s go downstairs, Leo,” she gasped.

“I’m not hungry.” He shrugged. “Anyhow, I need to practice my new double bass pedal.”

“No, we have to go downstairs.”

He perched on his stool, knees wrapped around the snare,

hands folded, face placid but curiously intent, as if reading her mind before making a decision.

“Let’s go,” she said. “We need to stick together.”

The entire second floor, with its high ceilings and perpetually dark hallway, seemed a breathing, sentient entity with its own agenda. The shadows possessed bulky, hulking shoulders. The windows, wide staring eyes. She tried to wring the image from her mind, but no sooner did she take a step away than it advanced again.

“I’ve found the rifles,” Dave called from the bottom of the stairwell. “Some idiot put them in the closet.”

Rachel bristled at “idiot,” then breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, he’d found the guns. She loved that about Dave—he achieved what he set out to do. The heaviness left her chest all of a sudden. The noises from the basement ceased, the breezes passing through the windows seemed just innocent streams of spring wind again. The upstairs shadows lifted. Leo gave up his thoughtful perch on his stool and rose to follow her out.

In the foyer, Dave held up both rifles when he saw her on the landing of the stairs.



Well, somebody put 'em in that closet.” Dave stood in the living room, his tone monotonous, his affect bland, undisturbed. “They didn’t walk in by themselves.”

“I’m tired of your sarcasm.” Rachel compressed her chapped lips, flopping in an over-stuffed chair. “It’s supercilious and condescending.”

Dave sighed. He loved his wife, her great capacity for empathy, her mind. But this growing disdain for the sheriff seemed undeserved. She kept staring at the man’s gut, as if examining him, as if she had x-ray vision and could see through his clothes straight through his abdominal wall and into his fatty liver. This side of her he didn’t much care for.

He could tell she didn’t like the man’s sausage fingers or his thick neck in a stiff khaki collar. But Sheriff Phil Wise was smart, educated, well-traveled, a stickler for upholding the law. Also widowed—his wife killed by a drunk driver. He didn’t speak much of his two sons, reputedly pot dealers in California. He’d only say, “I love them, but they’re lost to me now.” Cultivating trust was his business. He lived in Hygeine, Maryland, ten miles up Route 13, just over the border. Yet here he was, with a team of deputies, committed to helping them. More than the Virginia state police had been willing to do.

Now he seemed to be studying the landscape through the

back window of the living room. Peacocks perched on a woodpile, preening. It was still morning, and the window was coated with beads of dew.

Dave had a growing sense of something inexplicable, almost mystical about the murders. The sheriff's steel-gray gaze fixed on something behind the barn. The man knew more than he was letting on.

But Rachel was a woman of science. She would deny this force driven to kill on the last three full moons. Swear up and down it didn't exist. Until whatever it was—ghost, demon, werewolf, evil spirit—bit her on the ass. The least she could do was curb her sharp tongue and let the sheriff work.

Wise flipped open his pocket notebook and walked to the back window, leaned forward, as if a few extra inches might reveal some crucial clue. He scribbled something, maybe a diagram, then clicked the pen and returned it to his shirt pocket.

Next he examined the camcorder's viewfinder, looking through the lens, frowning. He rubbed the window with a forefinger. "Outside pane's dirty. Dust from the field, probably. Got any Windex?"

"Fresh out," said Dave. "Sorry."

"That's okay," said the sheriff. "There's some in the car."

He pulled a keychain from his bomber jacket, which was draped over a tufted leather-wing armchair that stood against the wall like a sentry. Above it, on the smoky blue wall, hung a painting of a ram's horn twined in a thorny vine. The sheriff's eyes lingered a moment on this new oil, Dave's most recent. He considered it his finest painting. One he'd never sell.

Sheriff Wise pressed an ear against a recessed panel of the door, paused and listened.

Everyone listened.

The world outside had seemed silent until the sheriff opened the door and the cawing of crows rushed through the house. Quickly, he shut it and it was quiet again.

Rachel began pacing. Dave sat at the Hemming grand piano, the same vintage as the house, its mahogany case shiny with beeswax. He plunked out "Man of La Mancha" with one finger, then dropped the fallboard with a clunk.

Wise returned from the car carrying a bottle of Windex and

a crumpled hankie. At the back window he adjusted the tripod and reset the camera on top. He pointed its lens at the copse of willows in the pasture and pressed record.

Dave rose from the piano and walked to the window to put his right eye to the viewfinder. "I don't get it. What exactly is it we're looking for?"

"Not sure. Just a feeling. Maybe something that hasn't happened yet."

"Dust blowing under the willows." Dave studied the weeping tendrils, their catkins swaying. "Looks like a dirt devil."

"Somethin's brewin'." The sheriff checked the electrical cords, then pushed the plug all the way into the surge protector. "Nobody trip, now, hear?"

Dave patted his back. "Thanks, Sheriff. Maybe we'll see something on camera we can't in real life. The rotten core."

Having slipped into the living room, the boys lay on the chenille sofa. Head to toe under a black cashmere throw, munching juicy apples.

"I think we ought to leave," mumbled Zack, between bites. "Me, too," echoed Leo.

Rachel strolled over to the window. "Sheriff, you've got your camera pointed at my horse's grave." She crossed her arms and stared into his eyes. Her effort to hold the tears in the cups of her lower lids was heartbreaking.

"Sorry, Doc," said the sheriff, the corners of his mouth pulling downward. "I didn't know it was there. Just keeping tabs on movement in the pasture."

• • • •

Rachel lifted the peacock feathers in the vase on the living room mantle, fanning them between fingers and thumbs. She felt everyone's eyes on her at once, and turned around. Blood rushed out of her face, which cooled and tingled.

"I don't mean to sound nasty," she said. "But someone in this house is playing tricks. Like moving rifles into the closet. I don't know who. People do strange things when they're afraid. Sometimes unconsciously."

"Not me." Zack rotated his apple around the core, chewing off small bits. He wiped juice off his chin with the back of a hand.

“Can’t we just drop it?”

“I didn’t blame you,” she said.

“Then who?” said Dave.

Zack stared at the floor. “If he wants to think I moved the rifles, let him, Mom.” Zack shrugged. “It’s soooo important to know whose fault it is. Isn’t that right, Dave?”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “David. Stop accusing Zack.”

“I didn’t. I was just asking who. It was a question. Is it a crime to ask a simple question?”

“Now you’re yelling,” she whispered.

“I am not. I was just saying.”

“Why don’t you just come out with it, then?”

He shook his head. “Maybe I moved them and don’t remember,” Dave muttered.

Leo pulled the blanket up to his chin, folding his arms.

She wondered what Leo was thinking. He was a quiet one. Up to a point. Often the last to offer an opinion, but when he did he meant it.

She shot Dave a glare, trying to telepathically say, *It’s time to shut up about who moved the rifles*. Leo’s face was pale, eyes slitted. His breathing rapid and shallow. He looked ready to flip. If anyone suggested he’d moved the rifles, he would develop a big attitude fast.

Mr. Volcano, she thought. *Wonder where he gets that?*

“Let’s move on to something else,” the sheriff said, still looking out at the pasture. “Get me a calendar.”

Dave’s eyes narrowed. “What’re you thinking?”

“Maybe there’s more to the pattern than a killer who strikes every twenty-eight days.” Dave walked over to his briefcase. “I have my phone.”

“If that’s all you’ve got. A paper calendar would be better.”

“Zack’s got a hot Maria Sharapova one upstairs.” Leo’s cheeks flushed. “Wearing a bikini, holding her tennis racket like a guitar.”

Zack rolled his eyes. “I’ll get it if you want.”

“Here’s my date book.” Dave pulled out a booklet covered with stickers. A neon green one read: *We’re rural, not stupid*. He handed it to the sheriff.

“Thanks.” Wise opened to a page with all the months in the year diagrammed with holidays.

Rachel touched Dave’s arm. “I need to search the eastern woods on a horse.”

“I’ll go. If something’s going on in the woods, I’m going to find out what.”

“I’ve studied the topography. You’re not a tracker,” said Rachel. “I am.” Rachel had been a mounted guide in the Sierras during college.

“What’s with this amateur sleuth thing?” Wise reached out a detaining hand, but Rachel brushed it aside.

“I’m going to ride,” said Rachel, “by myself.”

“No—I’m going with you.” Dave turned on her, red with anger. “I want you to take care of the boys, here.”

“The sheriff and his deputies can do that.”

“Not good enough.”

“You stay here, I’ll go.”

“No way.” She wasn’t backing down. She’d taken lessons in tracking in Wyoming, from one of the best—a Nez Pierce. Dave had scoffed at the idea that she could do a better job in the woods on a horse. And he hadn’t been the one studying the pattern for two solid months. This time, the killer would come from the dense forest east of the farm, the most logical way to approach without being seen. He’d probably already used the woods to scout out the house, leaving footprints. He might even have set up camp in some remote corner of those woods. Psychopath. Insane. Mumbling to himself, plotting. One out of every twenty-four persons is a psychopath, ready to crack.

Dave slung a rifle over his shoulder. “I’m going to find out what’s happening out there. Now.”

Rachel stared mutinously into his eyes. “I go alone.”

“I’ll call the deputies over,” said the sheriff. “Have one stay in the house with *both* of you and me and the boys while the other two search the woods.”

“Too many trails to cover on foot,” said Rachel.

“Look,” said Wise. “I don’t want you two going anywhere. This is my business. Not your business. Understand?”

“Nope,” said Dave. “I understand what you’re saying, but I don’t agree. If you know something about those woods then

spill it right now. Tell us everything you know. No time left for secrets. You're holding out on both of us and we all know it."

"This is not the time for me to be spreading my conjectures around," said the sheriff. "When I'm certain, I'll tell you what you need to know. I'm a professional. This is my business. When I need your help, I'll tell you."

"Damn you," said Dave. "We're going out. Unless you want to arrest us."

Wise shook his head. "I think it's dangerous."

"Post all the deputies here with the boys," said Dave. "I'll ride with Rachel to protect her. We'll be safe enough, so will the boys. The killer—or killers—has never struck during daylight."

"That might not mean anything," said the sheriff. "But I swear to God if I had the authority to stop you, I would."

"Dammit," said Rachel. "Let's go!"

"Okay," said Dave. "Maybe we'll find some footprints we can follow." He patted the stock of his rifle. "Let's go get some fresh air."

"You ride Slivovitz." She gritted her teeth, wishing Aristino were alive. "I'll take Le Pouf. I'll tell Lev." She sat at the dining table and texted the assistant.

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel, Dave, and Wise left Deputy Ruiz and her perfect figure to a game of Risk with Zack and Leo at the refectory table. The two other deputies sat the table, their rifles close at hand.

"You don't need to hover," Rachel said to the sheriff as they reached the barn. "Why not stay with your deputies. Make sure they behave."

The sheriff pulled up short, looking exasperated.

"Okay." He turned on his boot heel and immediately headed back to the side porch, then turned again. "There are a couple of reasons I'm letting you do this, aside from not having the authority to stop you." He stood wide and put his hands on his hips. "One, the two of you have been mostly distractions, so far. Two, it's daylight, and, three, I doubt either of you is the target—you're not children, and, Dave, you're not an old man living alone."

"Thanks for the Cliffs Notes," Rachel said. She hooked an arm through Dave's.

“I want you to promise me if you see trouble, you’ll fire that rifle at the ground three times. Bang, bang, bang! Just like that.”

“Got it, Sheriff,” said Dave.

“Pinky swear,” said Rachel.

The Sheltons threaded through the backyard shrubs, between clumps of rosebushes, passing a brown duck, Tartuffo, known for his fluffy tufted crown. The duck sat between fallen oak stumps, spooning his bill through the dirt. Peacocks scratched through flower beds for grubs.

Skanda, the Hindu war god, had ridden a peacock, thought Rachel. Peafowl were good luck. We need it. She held Dave’s hand, leading him between rows of asparagus toward the cypress barn, home to a baker’s dozen of horses.

• • •

Lev Lewin, dark-eyed as a Moor, saddled Slivovitz and Le Pouf in approval of their mission. He handed the horses off to Dave and Rachel, his thin arms pale in the sunlight. Dave had been right to choose him as an assistant. In horses, all three had experienced the lusty delight of something sweet, like a twelve-layered chocolate cake.

Lev’s family, the Lewins of Long Island, had made a fortune importing teas and pearls from the Orient. Lev had fled to Middlemarch County to escape the family business, as well as his parents’ gambling habit at Belmont, Queens, and Newport Jai Alai. While still a teen, he’d eloped with a Catholic girl who would only kiss him if he went to catechism. At his first job interview he’d spilled his guts. Donatella had been a Mafia princess. Her father was doing five to ten. Their marriage had been annulled by force—Lev had only signed the papers at gunpoint. He’d dropped out of Cornell and fled to Portugal—where he’d discovered horses could dance. There he’d studied the art of dressage with an old master who died at ninety, willing Lev his library and prized gray Lusitano mare.

The Sheltons had coached him for the Young Rider Championships on Maria the Pious. He’d stayed on, living above her stall, in an apartment next to the hayloft. He assisted in all their enterprises—training horses, selling olive oil and platinum business-card holders and cigarette boxes for flashy Europeans.

“Good luck,” he said. “Maybe you’ll see something useful out there and we can trap this nut.”

Dave nodded. “You have your gun?”

Rachel saw unspoken worry in Lev’s eyes. Visions of H.V. Ewell, impaled by the stop sign, entrails unravelling on the floor, flashed through her mind. Then Revel Petty, head split by an axe, blood and brains splattering Daisyland’s walls. And the Harper Boys, shot dead in Sharpsburg, their young bodies now rotting, hollow things. The earth pressing on their frail bones.

“I have my Remington.” Lev smiled. “Don’t worry. Nothing’s gonna happen while I’m here.”



He heard her voice. “I wish Aristino were alive.” Beneath the soil of the west pasture, the dead horse quickened.

The thirty-year-old Grand Prix Hanoverian had been shot by drunken trespassers during goose-hunting season the previous fall. A late snow had frozen the humus above his shallow grave. But now, galvanized by the growing storm of ghostly life force—the power of animal magnetism blaring from the west woods—his bones shifted. Not enough to disturb the thin white above the grave overhead. But enough to alert the budding trees that he did not rest. Their leafy branches began to sway in pendulous motion—slow dancing in the incense-breath of morning. The cluster of oaks behind Ewell’s Small Engine Repair and Bike Shop whispered to one another, “He lives, he lives.”

The horse raised the bony compartment that had once been his nostrils by leaning on the fulcrum of his great mandible. He sniffed the warm decay caked around him. The dirt was metallic, disgusting. He smelled and tasted moss and old leaves, grubs and dead roots. An emerald ash borer had lost its way and crawled into one nostril. He tried to sneeze, but couldn’t.

Thirteen months before, Dave had filled the burial pit with two tons of Bo jack soil pushed over the body with his backhoe. Then the Sheltons had stood over the sacred grave as crepuscular rays melted into the horizon and disappeared, tears

pouring from their eyes, dripping onto the dirt that covered their beloved, lost Aristino.

His ears and hide had long since decomposed, leaving only the bleached white skeleton that had once supported the desiderata of a stallion. No sound was of interest now. He'd found peace in silence. But the awakened activity of his brain, barely perceptible even to him, caused his jaw to clench. At first, he heard only the hum of the echoing subterranean quiet, felt its ring within his vast facial sinuses. But then, came echoes of a distant voice, as if a master were calling.

Air began to collect in his thorax within the tiny sacks of desiccated lung tissue now regenerating like champagne bubbles. Sinew adhered to bone. Ligaments wove gristly bands between joints. In the sockets of his skull, eyes connected only the memory of light to movement. Still, he saw only darkness. His tongue grew, tasting the loam around it. It snapped back with speed, pressing against the soft palate, sensing iron. He wanted to twist and turn, to find up from down. His disappointed tongue flicked out again, seeking salt, finding only bitter tannins in the remains of old stems and leaves. With a great heave, he shifted his haunches and felt dry spring earth trickle over them. As yet, his brain was dull, understanding only cramped discomfort, questioning nothing. He waited for more news from his senses. Electricity collected and traveled through rivers of nervous tissue, pushing against dark undertow, until tiny sparks joined together into burgeoning bays of lightning.

Into the sky above his grave, a thunderstorm approached from twenty miles away. Soon there would be lightning, rain. In only a few moments, brain and spinal cord would connect to his peripheral nerves, then to emerging muscles and organs. At last, again, he would be alive.

A gasp inflated his powerful nascent lungs. The depressed and crumbling surface of the grave heaved up to the level of the forest floor. Blue jays flew off, outraged, shrieking. A badger stayed behind, nose twitching. As did a vixen. Her hunting interrupted, she waited to see what would happen next. A rooster crowed a warning to his wandering clutch.

Instinct told the horse nothing about where he was, or what had happened to him, or why the long sleep. Instinct only said,

stand upright, so he fought to roll up off his side and flex his forelegs under his body. At first, he was pinned by the weight of two tons of crumbly loam. He rested for a moment and tried again, this time loosening enough of the heavy, dark ceiling overhead to rise to a semi-prone position, hind legs tensed beneath his belly, forelegs tucked. His muzzle, now covered with soft fur and fine whiskers, rested on one foreleg a moment.

The horse half-closed his eyes and sighed. He dozed, mind deepening into a light sleep. But sandy loam and decomposed shells migrated between budding hairs and into the renewed flesh of his skin. An old iron plow was jabbing one rib. He quivered with cold. Then every inch of his panniculus muscle contracted, wrinkling skin in the rhythm of stars twinkling. He felt the vaulted earth around him as a cocoon—of grit. No room to sweat. He was suffocating. His adrenal glands spewed epinephrine, which made his hide slippery, releasing the thrust of his will.

If he had known his head was only inches from the surface, or had been able to reason that the moisture in the ground had weakened its hold on him, he might've been able to stand directly. But he wasn't capable of reason. So he consulted only contracting haunches and pawing hooves, his most trustworthy advisors. His front legs burrowed while his hind legs pushed, a tactic which had its merits.

He excavated with doggish exuberance. The displaced dirt caused the surface of his grave to collapse, opening a doorway to the sky with needles of a pine tree swinging across it. Then his eyes took over, telling him to stick a hoof, *jambette*, into that tempting hole of sky. As he rose to the light, there came a hunger for grasses, a thirst for water. And an overwhelming eagerness to find his master.



Dave looked up at the broken fingers of light reaching through the fog's gray blanket of worried sky. Broken beams slipped over the gabled roof of the Dutch barn. He watched Rachel as she pulled on leather gloves, snapped the Velcro closed, then tickled Le Pouf's nose. She caught his gaze and smiled back. For now he would ignore the doom that pressed down on the entire family, sparing no one.

To avoid bruising their horses' backs, Dave and Rachel mounted from solid oak stumps positioned under a wall-sized mirror affixed to the white barn. Each horse seemed to stare at himself, or at least recognize a close relative bowing in front of his own reflection. The morning dew had all but evaporated from the glass, leaving tiny rivulets dripping from its edges. Dave and Rachel rounded their horses' necks in the mirror simultaneously—as if the mounting process had been choreographed, right down to the patting of shoulders and the slow, moderate seat adjustments.

“We should try to be as nice to each other as we are to Slivovitz and Le Pouf,” said Dave, reaching with a gloved hand to rub his horse's salt and pepper mane, quick-braided from forelock to withers in the usual Andalusian style.

“You're right, Davey.” A tiny smile penetrated her frown.

“I’m sorry we argued.” She was watching his face in the arena mirror.

Dave rubbed his horse’s withers. Slivovitz snorted three times, blowing a cloud of snot that landed on his own slate-colored chest.

“Hairballs?” said Dave, ignoring a fleeting spasm deep in his guts.

“Le Pouf is not a psycho. He’s just sensitive.” Rachel patted the dove-colored Le Pouf, paler than the other horse.

“You’re right. He’s altogether more civilized. If he were a person, he’d be a Quaker.” Slivovitz was coiled like a spring.

They took the piaffe path, a two-hundred-meter straight trail, lined on both sides by Empress trees. Broad leaves like hands waved goodbye in the chilly pine-laced swells of wind. Purple trumpets of flowers littered sparse patches of new grass.

Both horses offered the piaffe, the trot in place, without being asked, out of habit.

“Le Pouf seems eager.” Rachel laughed for the first time that day. “He’s begging to gallop. Let’s go.”

“Kay, Rach.” She’d been remote all morning. It dissolved, at least for a moment, into the suddenly scorched breeze. It was as if God had turned up the volume of the sun. Dave sighed with relief. Their synchronized rides were exercises in solitude and mastery; each merged with a horse compelled to obey—but, still, any horse by his very nature, driven to evade, to escape the rider’s will. If this were their last day on earth together, he would take Rachel by the waist and make love to her. If she resisted, he would force her.

They rode a track through the woods, the ground flat as a billiard-table. Within minutes the gallop slowed without effort into a waltz-like canter. He hummed Chopin’s Ashkenazy waltz. They cantered a corner, still abreast. Hooves sounded a dull clomping as the footing changed to a tractor-wide path of close-cropped winter wheat at the edge of a field, planted at Christmas, usually harvested around Easter. The forest embraced the perimeter of the knee-high leaves of grass. A jungle of beech trees, sycamore, and black walnut was riven by game trails half-obscured by choking Virginia creeper and tangles of scrub holly and wild honeysuckle.

“Let’s walk a minute,” Dave said, dropping his reins to the buckle.

He ducked beneath the limb of a locust tree and scanned the gentle wave on the field that seemed to be sailing northward. For him, nothing was more mysterious than the scent on which hill-topping horses were dependent for their sport. As a rule, horses acquired their best tracking scents on grass.

“You’ve got a nose like a rat terrier,” Rachel said. “You ought to try tracking.”

A week before, he’d found a mouse nest between two stacks of hay that’d eluded Nijinsky. Poor, dead Nijinsky. “I try not to miss a thing, Rach.”

He lifted his nose to the air. Slivovitz rotated his ears back toward his rider and snorted as if to blow a sprig of hay out of his own nose.

“You could get a job with Homeland Security.” Rachel laughed. “You know, sniffing luggage like a Labrador.”

A smell reminiscent of stale horse sweat, but fetid, fermented, now greeted Dave’s nostrils. Repulsive yet familiar, almost like the buck rack bedraggled with strings of meat Wolfgang had dragged home last week. But this wasn’t decayed deer carcass.

“Let’s walk a little more.” He called through air, now tainted with too many odors: sulfur, a freshly dug hole, grass, a hint of cinders. But fused, in a swampy, alluvium stench.

“Yuck,” she said. “God. What is that?” Both horses’ sweaty necks bulged. Their haunches coiled as if winding up to leap into gallop. The horses didn’t like the smell either. “Not your typical carrion that Wolfie rolls in. Far worse than last week’s bath in decomposing deer organs.”

Dave remembered how funny Rachel had looked, wagging her finger at Wolfgang, lecturing him in her good-boy-doggie voice. He grinned, recalling the smarter-than-shit cardiologist and county medical examiner, and her ineffectual childlike admonishments of the droopy dachshund. He patted Slivovitz’s withers. Both horses snorted, alarmed.

“What is that stink, Davey. You’re the one with the nose. Come on. Tell me.”

He shrugged, drool filling his mouth. “Just—gross.”

“Jesus.”

Both horses lowered their heads as if trying to make out the meaning of some sound. A pounding of earth inaudible to their riders.

Dave and Rachel looked over their shoulders, into the woods behind them.

“I think we should canter on.” Dave reached up and rubbed the loose braid of Slivovitz’s gray mane.

“Ready,” she said.

Both their mounts struck off in the same breath, abreast, having practiced it a million times.

The muffled thudding of another galloping horse echoed through the forest. “They hear it, too.” He called back to Rachel, over wind that batted his ears.

“Of course they do,” she yelled. “They’re horses.”

He thought of turning back. No. She wouldn’t want to. He knew that. But inside his chest his heart jackhammered.

The horses cantered faster, almost stampeding. Fear tasted bitter as grape seeds on Dave’s tongue.

Beside a tangle of woods, he extended an arm to ward off some specter galloping along next to them. He touched nothing, except the speed of the rushing, scorched air. The ears of Slivovitz and Le Pouf twirled like antennas. Had some fetid thing risen from the grave to come rushing up behind them? An injured animal, sick with some horrible pestilence, like the germ that had caused the frogs to die? He twisted his neck and glanced over a shoulder, but saw only the blinking eyes of beech trees, the green choking vines that ate up weaker, smaller bushes.

In the next instant a huge, brown shape leapt straight at him.

Slivovitz and Le Pouf must have seen it too. They wheeled and flew into the woods like lasers. A duet of snorting filled Dave’s ears.

He looked over at Rachel, unable to speak, throat knotted shut. She ducked her head below Le Pouf’s neck, avoiding a branch.

They sailed over a massive ancient stump and landed in a box canyon of trees made impenetrable by palisades of undergrowth. Then, as if protected like foxes in a den, the horses slowed, seemed to relax, heads low, ribs heaving. Both riders loosened the reins to the buckle and halted.

They were panting, too. Rachel sneezed into the crook of an arm, then lifted her shirttail and wiped her forehead, jaw set. Dave stared at her face, a face he could never grow tired of. He wanted to protect her. She flashed a reticent smile. She was damming up her emotions. Stalwart in all edgy games of dominance, she knew when it was safe to crumble, and when it was not.

The smell was gone. The only sounds in the forest now were the deep breathing of the four of them, the rustling of leaves.

“Listen,” he said. “No more hoof beats.”

He swallowed past the bucket of acid locked at the bottom of his throat. “That was no horse behind us,” said Rachel. “It must have been a sick buck.”

“Too big to be a buck.” Dave looked around for a way out of the thicket. “Did you get a good look at it?”

“I didn’t see a horse,” Rachel insisted, shaking her head. “Just a big, brown stinky blob. It wasn’t that weird.”

“Well, it scared me.” He refolded his sleeves, which had fallen and were flopping at his wrists. “And I didn’t say it was a horse. Maybe a moose.” He considered faking a laugh, but couldn’t muster one.

“I know you think it was a horse,” said Rachel, chewing one cheek.

“You have to admit,” said Dave, snatching off a chokecherry twig that stuck in his hair. “The hoof beats sure sounded like a horse.”

“Didn’t smell like one. Phew!”

Dave leaned over Slivovitz’s neck and worked a burr from his forelock, then buried his face in the horse’s neck and inhaled. He swallowed, rubbing his cheek against the silky hair.

There was a sudden look of enlightenment on Rachel’s face. Then she turned pale and lines formed on her brow. “That was not a dead horse,” she said.



A gunshot, then a shout rang out through the woods. Rachel jumped, spooking her horse, then gave a wary side-glance to Dave. He shook his head in a kind of shared foreboding. No birds sang. No insects chirped. There came only the sussurant whisperings of leaves, like old men wringing dry hands. Le Pouf and Slivovitz lifted their necks and pricked their ears, snorted and stamped. For them, country shootings made familiar noise. Rachel backed her horse away from the top of a slope. The ground fell away steeply for ten yards. *We should have ridden out into the woods last week, or the week before. Not today*, she thought. Her hands and feet went cold. She shook them until they tingled and burned, then patted Le Pouf's neck and held the reins at the buckle with one hand.

Dave looked at Rachel, and blinked. "Let's check out the perimeter." The horses walked nose to tail on the rim of the thicket.

"That could've been someone shot. By the killer," she said. She stood in her stirrups, trying to get a view of the felled tree and the old creek bed that'd led them here. *Was it a trap?*

"Not enough speed to get out the way we came in. Can't jump it from the walk," she said.

Dave leaned over one side of his horse and pulled away a

tangled mass of honeysuckle vine. He peered down a dark alley of woods. "It only kills at night."

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

"I don't mean anything." He led the way down a narrow trail between a pair of loblolly pines.

"Why are you so sure he'll only do it at night?" she asked.

Dave broke dry branches that blocked a game trail, breaking off twigs that could injure the horses' eyes. "Come on, Rachel. It's always been that way." He was a few meters into the woods now. Deer scat freckled a narrow track of dirt, marked by hoofprints. "That was probably just a turkey hunter.

"You don't know that." She and Le Pouf followed Dave and Slivovitz, one length behind. Slivovitz swished his tail at a dogwood branch that struck him on the rump. "Those tail hairs would make a beautiful violin bow for Mom," Rachel said.

"She'd like that, Rach." He held a juniper limb back for his horse to pass, then took his pocketknife out and sawed off some green sprouts. "Watch out you don't get branched, honey."

"Thanks, Davey. You're doing a good job leading us out of here. A real mountain man." Rachel thought of the cords of oak he and the kids had cut and loaded in the rickety wheelbarrow and stacked by the side of the house, where the coal chute had once been.

A cardinal called *Wheat!Wheat!Wheat!* from the crotch of a maple. She looked up and saw baby clouds sailing through patches of sky as if they had all the time in the world. The cardinal fluttered off.

"The shot had to be a marsh hunter." He stepped over a lodge pole pine. "Careful."

"They hunt more turkeys...on the bayside these days than the seaside." Rachel bent over to pick a stem of bluebells poking out of a gnarl of thorns.

"If it is a hunter," said Dave. "We've got to do something about it."

"You're right. I don't want to see another one near our farm. Ever. Not after—"

Le Pouf let out a shrill neigh. Dave stood in the stirrups and looked around. Rachel froze and listened for the cause of Le Pouf's worry. She trusted her horse.

“Hello!” She reassured Le Pouf with a gentle rub on the withers. “Hello!” she called again. Rachel waited below a hollowed-out tree. The old locust was dead from within. A rotted branch hung over her head, like a benediction.

Dave turned and marched back up the dry creek. “Slivovitz smells something. Hold him while I check it out.” He leapt off his horse, handed her the reins and kissed her, then headed down the bank, scattering last fall’s rotting acorns.

Rachel dismounted and stood between the two grays, tickling their noses to keep them entertained. The last thing she needed was to be squashed between two irate stallions on a trail only wide enough for one. When a brown blaze, probably a sick buck, had darted by, filthy with mud, putrid with infection, she flinched.

On any other day in her life, she might have liked this spot. Found the white oak trees reaching upward peaceful, chapel-like, and meditative.

Her stomach growled. All she’d had to eat today were Oreos, mini Mr. Goodbars, and coffee.

If only she had the sensitivity of a horse in combination with her brainpower—that would help in their all-out effort to catch a killer. Horses could feel the tremors on the surface of the earth created by the tread of animals or man. Vibrations were transmitted through hooves, the soft parts of their feet, up their legs and into the large sound boxes in their skulls. The ears of Le Pouf and Slivovitz were now swiveling in every direction. Detecting vibrations denied to Rachel’s ears, but deep in her bones, she felt their coursing rhythm.

“Rachel,” Dave called. He sounded far away. “I need you. Quick!” If only she had the sensitivity of a horse.

“Rachel!” He called again. “Come here.”

She snapped out of her revelry. Heart beating loudly, she led the horses over the bank and down into the dry creek bed as quickly as she could. She first saw Dave’s back to her, standing motionless. Then, George Creed, on his knees in the dry riverbed, striped by shadow.

“I’m shot,” said Creed, his face a sickly yellow, his wide-brimmed leather hat lying on a rock beside him, discarded rifle on top of it. He wore jeans, a flannel shirt, and a plaid wool

jacket. Dave was standing above him, stunned, shading his eyes with a hand.

Shot, thought Rachel. Creed's face reflected relief at seeing a doctor, but also a curious dispassion. Her head ached, the sudden brightness of the open sky over the creek bed made her eyes burn. Her face prickled with sweat. Her stomach churned with the hollowness of hunger she often confused with dread. Plus, she had cramps. And Dave was being an idiot, she thought, looming over Creed as if there weren't probably a killer still in the woods drawing a bead on his head.

"I think I shot myself." Creed tried to grin. He pressed both hands to his side. Blood oozed between the fingers.

Rachel felt shame and relief—mostly relief. She was dazed, as if she'd been punched in the stomach. That must be why she was so slow to lend a hand. She was the doctor, but it was Dave who squatted to support the swaying Creed with an arm around his shoulder. With his free hand he opened Creed's shirt.

Rachel steadied her gaze and bent to examine the long shallow laceration that raked the man's rib. She flexed her fingers to restore blood flow to the tips. The wound was bloody but not serious.

"I shot myself," he repeated, wonderingly.

"We thought we heard a shots," said Rachel.

"Jesus Christ," said Dave.

Maybe Creed was delusional. Maybe he only thought he'd shot himself, but instead, had only cut his side on a tree limb. Felled maples bisected the straight path of the riverbed. Boughs of pitch pine crossed like spilled fireplace matchsticks. Rachel imagined them swept into hex signs by contrary winds.

"I'll need to position you better to get a good look," she told him. "Let's get you back and clean this up." The throbbing glare baked her eyes, but when she glanced up, squinting, heavy clouds were approaching like a tide coming in.

"Hmm. Wound needs cleaning and suturing." She tensed, leaning forward, against gravity. "Let's get you back to the house."

Dave peeled off his sweater and undershirt, then tore the thin ribbed tee into long strips and wrapped them around Creed's rib cage. "All right, Little Big Man," said Dave. "Lie back and rest."

“I’m all right,” said Creed, between gulps of air. He waited on his knees, groaning, while Dave secured the edges of the dressing with square knots.

“This is more serious than you think, George. You sure you shot yourself?” Rachel tested her patient’s reflexes, his corneal and gag responses, then snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

“Why do you believe you did it?”

“Oh, I did it,” said Creed.

“What’s your birth date?”

“May 25, 1969.”

“Today’s date?” she fired back.

“April...um.”

“The year, George.”

“2015”

“Who’s president?”

“Obama,” said George. “Okay, I passed. I’m telling you, I did it myself.”

“Goddamn it!” said Rachel. “Not with a rifle. Impossible.”

He smiled and waved off her hand. “On my way to your house...to help out,” said Creed. “Check the empties.”

Dave backed away from his wife and her patient and picked up the gun that lay across the leather hat and a shiny brass shell peeking from a mound of pine shats.

“It’s been fired.” Dave’s voice held the same relief Rachel felt. Then his eyes narrowed. “But how the hell did you shoot yourself with your own damn rifle, George?”

“Aiming at something else,” Creed said. “Must’ve ricocheted. I know—it doesn’t seem possible. No boulders out here, only trees and brush. Besides, I’m sure I hit the damn thing. It was charging straight at me trying to bite me or stomp me, and I fired point blank.”

A chill penetrated Rachel’s neck, then raced to the base of her spine. For a vertiginous moment, she felt the nausea of a sudden descent on a roller coaster.

“It looked like that dead horse you buried a couple years ago.” Creed’s face was dark, two days of shadow growing into a salt and pepper beard. He let out a chuckle—the kind teenage boys make when they do Beavis and Butthead imitations. “You know—Aristino? Maybe the bullet ricocheted from its heart.”

“You’re delirious.” His commentary seemed to confirm the last several hours had been the worst in her life. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I guess I do,” said Creed, tiny hands fisting up. “Maybe not its heart, but some bone mighty close to it. That, or I missed.”

“Well, you obviously missed.” Patients often lied to save face. “That just doesn’t happen,” she said.

“Could’a,” said Creed.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Rachel said. “Not even as a joke.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“Shut up,” Rachel said, before she could stop herself. She backed away from Creed as he rose to his feet, blood still oozing between the fingers pressed to his side. He let go with one hand, pointed at the gun, then waved once, signaling for Dave to give the rifle back. Dave handed it to him, stock first.

“Guess I really pissed you off. Sorry.” She stared back with empty eyes, trying to fit a thin veneer of glacial blandness over her anger. “Actually, I’m just as confused as you are.”

“Why don’t you get on my horse and I’ll lead you back,” said Dave.

“I can walk.” Creed staggered up the creek bed. “We’d better get to the house before I bleed to death.”



All five foot two inches of George Creed lay stretched out on a sheet on the dining room table with inches to spare. He wore hunting boots about size eight—boys. Above him, the electrical entrails that had fallen out of the gaping hole where the chandelier hung hours before were wound and secured with a rubber bungee cord.

“What happened?” he said. “Looks like that big old dinosaur was too much for the plaster.”

“All the fixtures were original. No cracks in the ceiling. No reason for it to fall,” said Dave, shaking his head. “But it did. Sheriff Wise has been up there to measure it. The plaster around it is completely intact.” Dave was emptying his pockets out on a dining room chair: wallet, knife, Leatherman tool, mini-Mag flashlight, lighter, two peppermints. He flipped the switch of his flashlight on and off to see if it was in working order. “It’s about the same size as the hole in Mr. Ewell’s floor.”

“Interesting,” said Creed. “The size of a man?”

Rachel cocked her head and looked into Creed’s eyes. He was often at the question-asking side of a dialogue. The “spy academy” type, minus the phone in the shoe and the bullet-proof tuxedo.

Dave left. The oak floors creaked under his brisk steps.

“Let’s see what we have here.” Rachel pulled open the flap

from a new box of rubber gloves. She slid a floor lamp next to Creed, switched it on and aimed its beam at the wound. Dave returned, having changed into Levi's, stuffing equipment back into his pockets. Rachel pulled on a pair of rubber gloves with a snap and unbuttoned Creed's shirt.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's bleeding." She paused for effect. "A lot. But there's not much to it."

She looked at his hands. Small, narrow palms. Long, dainty fingers. The hands of a dancer, or musician. The fingers of a girl. Uncalloused and smooth.

"I'll just take a nap while you do your stitching, Dr. Shelton." Creed closed his eyes. "No need for the hospital."

"No need," agreed Rachel. A smile twitched one corner of her mouth. She couldn't take Creed to the hospital. She was indispensable at home. So was Dave. And it's better to have Sheriff Wise and his deputies on site.

"We could call an ambulance," Rachel said. She knew well enough Creed wouldn't set foot in a hospital unless shipped there unconscious. A middle-aged tough guy—overjoyed to be the only neighbor that hadn't fled Zebulon. He liked to carry weapons and, presumably, to use them. He also liked solitude, she was sure.

Creed passed himself off as a farmer when it suited him, and as a cartographer when it didn't. Until the murders, he'd been the town's biggest mystery. His wife was a scion of a Zebulon society family—something of a joke in itself—but Creed himself was unfathomable. A quiet man who took innumerable business trips. Some speculated that he drew salary from the CIA. He was so handy with rifles, handguns, even crossbows.

"Undo that." She pointed to his large belt buckle. "Or I can unhook it."

He squeezed his eyes shut and felt for the plate of jeweler's bronze, then slid the prong out of the hole with a groan. Rachel wondered what the buckle set was hiding—perhaps a .22 short mini-revolver? A fastener peeked from the inside of a belt loop, tucked behind his jeans. She studied the waist of his pants, thinking everything he wore was some sort of contraption for carrying tools—or weapons. His camera vest, fanny pack, odd straps on his clothes. Even pockets seemed to possess too much

carrying capacity for such a small person. She suspected the object clipped onto the inside of his jeans held a knife-sheath. She, too, was convinced Creed was a spy.

“Where’s your wife?” The man on the table held his breath while she injected lidocaine into the skin around the gash on his bottom rib, just above the liver. She squirted some straight out of the needle onto the ragged flesh.

“Libba’ll be back tomorrow,” he said, eyes still closed. She popped a surgical sponge out of its plastic sleeve, looked at the ill-timed grandfather clock in the foyer and shook her head, then started to prep the wound. She was too busy now to think about the horse. Creed winced, then relaxed and resumed the slow, deep breathing of a martial artist.

Zack and Leo walked into the dining room—Zack only to walk right out again. Rachel heard the rusty hinge of the door on the landing, then the latch snapped. The floor creaked under the settee as Leo sat down.

“Can I sew it up?” Leo Said.

“Back up to your room,” Dave said. “You’ll get in the way.”

“I’ll be quiet.” He stood still as a post, blond hair freshly combed, nine-year-old face assuming a studied calm. “Can’t I just watch? What’s that white stuff?” He pointed at the shiny gristle, the torn meat casting a green and pink rainbow sheen like silverside roast beef.

“You have math homework,” Dave said. “Go upstairs and do it. And tell Zack to get off the sofa on the landing. He can go to his own bed to take a nap.”

Leo said nothing, only stared at his father for a moment, folding his fingers into tight fists. Then he left the room.

• • • •

Dave muttered to himself, mood darkening. Rain streaked the windows. Now he had a bleeding man on his dining room table. Besides that, he had two children, one of them fathered by someone else, both poised for rebellion. And on the worst day of his life. He believed Creed’s story about seeing a horse and shooting it, even if Rachel didn’t. He also believed that a horse smelling of rot had galloped by Le Pouf and Slivovitz, perhaps too quickly to be seen. The more he thought about it,

the more scared he felt.

The bullet could've bounced off a breastbone. He paced between the dining room and the foyer. Or passed through the horse and hit a rock or piece of metal in the creek bed.

"I need your help, Dave." Rachel hovered over Creed. "Get me the trash can, and something empty, like a bottle."

She continued sewing, making perfect little knots all lined up like a narrow blue caterpillar. Then smeared antibiotic cream on the mended gash and bandaged the sutures with a gauze pad dressing.

Dave admired her dexterity, her intensity. Her face framed by waves of dark auburn was like that of a pre-Raphaelite heroine, Beata or Ophelia, or one of the three fates, made anachronistic by the wielding of her needle driver and suture scissors. He wanted to paint her reclining in the claw-footed bathtub, surrounded by floating rose petals, under-lit by candles. Would he ever get to do so? Tomorrow. Maybe.



From the bed, Beatrice telephoned her old friend, Gladys Quinn, who lived in the neighboring town of Hope.

“Hi, Gladys, darling.” She cleared her throat. “Beatrice here.”

“Bea!” said Gladys, ebullient and charming as usual. A Liverpudlian by birth, she’d studied history at Oxford and through many years of schooling had acquired the Queen’s English. Her master’s thesis had been on the bubonic plague. “To what do I owe this wondrous occasion? How long has it been, Bea?”

“Two years. The last time we played cards was after the garden tour.” Beatrice coughed again. “Gladys, darling, I’ve called to make an amends.”

“Not necessary, my dear Bea.”

Maybe Gladys had forgotten because the players had been in such a pleasant haze of inebriation.

“Gladys, I cheated at bridge the last time we played, and I’m sorry. Just wanted you to know. In fact, I’ve often cheated. More often than not. Depending on the game. And the competition.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You’ve always been stiff competition, Gladys.” Beatrice heard ice cubes dropping into a glass in the background. “Still seeing the Reverend Trask?”

“Yes, Bea. Tango lessons on Friday nights. His day off from the rectory.”

“He was always so dreamy. So tranquil and quietly masculine.”

Gladys’ voice faded to a whisper. “I heard Zebulon’s deserted because of the killer. That everyone else is gone. Is it true, Bea?”

“The mayor headed north this morning in a Winnebago.”

“It all sounds frightful!” Gladys sneezed a tiny lady-like snort, like a *Bijon-Frisé*. “I’ve heard there’re cold spots all through the town. That the place is severely haunted.”

“Nonsense.” Beatricia shuddered, but felt a spark of excitement. “You know, Gladys, truth is I’ve been in bed with killers for almost a year now. Heart attacks, now neuropathy. So death is less than a stranger. Something of a friend. I’m not afraid of this Zebulon menace.” Beatricia rather welcomed it. Here, at last, was something she could combat without medicines or scalpels.

“You’ve always been so thick-skinned, Bea.” Gladys slurped her drink through a straw. “I’ve heard it’s a meticulous killer. Murdering in strange ways, obsessive about the way it rearranges furniture in the houses of the dead. I bet the authorities know something. I mean, it’s a cover-up, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s looking for something. And only dangerous if you try to stop it. But don’t worry. I’m a true believer. Nothing can really happen to me.”

Gladys sighed. Slurped again. “I suppose you’re right.”

There was no possibility this entity was fully human. She already knew about the cold spots rumored to be following her friend, Phil Wise. News of apparitions had not been needed. Spirits wandered the halls of both the houses of the murder victims and the Sheltons’ house. Beatricia knew it, without being told, even if no one had yet seen them.

“Let’s get together soon for Mah Jong,” said Gladys.

“I’d say that’d be terrific.”

“I’ll ring next week. The Reverend Trask will be here soon.” Gladys tittered. “I’ve got to run along now, primp a bit. Best of luck, darling.”

“Bye.”

Apparitions were made possible by the animal magnetism

of the living or the restless dead. It was such a cheery thought. When a human being expended energy in a sealed space, it condensed into an organized field that spirits from the other side could tap into and use to materialize themselves and/or animate matter.

“Power to the people,” Beatricia muttered. “Dead people, that is. Too bad some spirits misuse it.”

No ghost could exist among the living without using the force of thought or emotion of a person who had struggled when alive—or, so she theorized. But then, again, she could be wrong, which wouldn’t matter much. She’d find out the truth, sooner or later. After all, there wasn’t much time left. Still, she was curious, and the day would pass quicker if she roused from her bed and did a little work with the disembodied. She might be able to save the lives of those she loved. That settled the matter. She liked Dave well enough. Loved Rachel. And, though she’d spent very little time with her grandchildren, she wasn’t about to let them be destroyed by what would probably turn out to be a second-rate entity.

She leaned on her two aluminum canes and heaved up out of bed, then shuffled over to her armoire to collect her paisley wash dress, compression stockings, and orthotic shoes. She pulled her favorite scarf off its hanger with the crook of her cane. Her breathing was rapid by the time she sat back down on the patchwork quilt to wrestle the clothes on. She donned a heavy raincoat that would keep out the chill from the coming storm. Damp cold weather always aggravated her rheumatism. She popped an extra Percocet just in case. She’d already checked the Weather Channel. The temperature was forty-eight, eighty percent humidity, and a low-pressure system was sweeping north from the Carolinas. Meteorology was such a soft science. She wrapped the blue scarf around her neck, preparing for the icy blocks of air she was sure to encounter in the yellow house now infested with a severely restless spirit—the famous one on Zebulon postcards, called “Daisyland.”

Outside her cottage, she paid little attention to Nijinsky. The Russian blue had come walking stiffly out of the barn. Something was the matter with that cat, but she didn’t have time to think about it. Beatricia rambled through her ivy lawn

and across the shell drive to the main house. Rain pattered on fallen leaves piled together like tiny corpses at a mass funeral. She glanced back at Nijinsky and frowned. He not only looked a dead translucent grey, but all four paws were aflame. In fact, he wasn't breathing. His form wove around her damp ankles as she stumbled her slow way up the side porch steps. The cat's fur was cold, spiky as ice crystals in an old freezer. She stopped to steady herself on the iron railing at the second step.

"Get out of my way." She swung both canes. Nijinsky's feline aura was gone. He was not advanced enough to be a true ghost—what was left of the cat was just a mirage.

She patted her cheeks and felt the back of her head to check that her bun was still bound, then heaved up the top two steps of the porch. She squinted at the noonday sun that eked a few dismal rays through the expanding carpet of sooty clouds. By the time she reached the side door, Creed had climbed off the dining-room table. Dave was making coffee; Rachel had probably refused to do it. When she spied her tottering mother on the porch, she frowned and scarfed down another Oreo. The sheriff stood in the foyer, next to the grandfather clock, flipping through his pocket notebook. He held his cell phone up to an ear and stomped around the parlor, positioning himself to obtain the best cell signal, all while barking orders at his deputies.

"Take me to Daisyland," Beatricia said, the pair of canes straining under her weight, a rain-spotted spirit board tucked under one arm. She reached into the sweater pocket that held the anxious planchette, and rested a hand on it to keep it from stirring.

"I'll stay with the kids," said Dave.

"Forget it." Rachel shook her head. "We're not going anywhere."

"You're right," said Dave. "Number one, we have to stay together. Number two, we're at maximum strength here. Number three, there's no point."

"Oh yes, there is, you doubting Thomas, you," said Beatricia.

"How do you know anything about this, Mother?"

Beatricia sniffed. "Where's that smoke coming from? It's been in the air all morning."

No answer.

She indicated the spirit board with the nod of her head. "I have my ways."

"That's a lie," said Rachel. "You've been talking to someone."

"Of course I have, dear," Beatrice said. "And that thing outside isn't your cat, or even his ghost."

Rachel set another half-eaten cookie down on a trivet, cream filling smudged on her lower lip. "What thing? Nijinsky died, not a mark on him. We buried him."

"Something that looks like the cat is out there walking around, setting my pine mulch on fire with his feet."

"*What?*" Rachel ran to the door and peered through the pane. "Where is it?"

"Don't open that door," said Dave. "There's no cat out there."

"Believe what you want." Beatrice flipped a wrist. "To each his own."

Sheriff Wise snapped his cell phone and slipped into the dining room—quietly, for such a large man. "I can't let you go into Revel Petty's house, Mrs. Fulbright."

"You're still sheriff because of me," she said. "Suppose everyone knew we helped your pot-head sons jump bail and slip off to California."

Wise paled. "You wouldn't."

"I have six months to live, Phil. Maybe less. My heart is failing. What I do now, I do for my soul."

"Damn it all, Bea."

"What's this all about?" Rachel snapped a rubber band on her wrist three times, a sign she was sliding into anger.

Creed laughed, in spite of his injury, hand cradling his side. He seemed energized by the brief dispute. He rose and sauntered about the room. "I'll go with you, Mrs. Fulbright," He smirked at the sheriff.

Outside, a tractor bounced down Burnt Chestnut Road in misty silence—except when Lev opened the door to the side porch and the noise briefly rumbled in.

"Nobody goes without me," said the sheriff.

"Then we'll all go." Creed smiled.

"To hell with it," said Rachel. "I'll round up the boys."

Beatrice looked into Dave's eyes. They were dilated, and the upper lids sagged with fatigue. The lines in his forehead were

more pronounced than usual. His lips were compressed, as if to hold in a string of angry words. Beatrice shook her head.

Creed had the narrow-eyed look of a spy. He was calm, but she didn't trust him. In contrast, she'd liked Lev since she'd first met him when he'd ridden up to the door of her cottage on Queen Mary the Pious and let her feed the gray mare carrots. She'd laughed like a child, letting the horse nuzzle her fingers. Lev's smile was delicious. His scar made it even better. She enjoyed his company. And there was depth to him, a spiritual aura. His shoulders and neck were relaxed. His breathing deep, slow and rhythmic. His skin always smelled of saddle soap. He had the face of a Benedictine monk—rational, serene.

"Lev," she said.

He looked up. Smiled so broadly the skin around his scar crinkled piratically which only made him more handsome. Zack once said he wanted a scar like that. If Lev knew, he'd say, "Real scars are earned."

"Would you be a dear and go in my cottage, get the black duffle at the foot of my bed?" asked Beatrice. "And don't forget the little jar of holy water on my altar. New stuff from Father Steven."

"Happy to, Mrs. Fulbright."

"We'll need coats for Daisyland," said the sheriff, his lids descending to half-mast as if to shut off further arguments.

"Lev," said Beatrice, in her come-hither voice.

He raised his eyebrows. "Ma'am?"

"Bring my coat, too. The red wool with the fake lamb collar."

Lev let the screen door slam behind him.

"It's a warm spring day," said Dave, shaking his head. "We don't need coats. Don't be silly."

Wise looked at Deputy Ruiz and Beatrice, and nodded.

"We're gonna need them," said Beatrice, arching a plucked eyebrow. "Expect cold spots when spirits are present. Isn't that right, Sheriff? And it's starting to rain."

Wise laughed. "I'll be wearin' my bomber jacket, Bea."

She hobbled over to a mirror hanging by the side door, and took a good look at herself. "Not bad," she said. She put a finger in her mouth, moistened it and used it to flatten her eyebrows. "Let's get going. We're burning daylight."



Phil Wise helped Beatricia settle into the passenger seat of his patrol car.

“Love the Crown Victoria,” she said, running a hand across the leatherette dashboard. “Naugahyde. A cruelty-free fabric.”

Wise patted the car top like the head of a favorite dog. “She’s got a hemi engine.”

“Nice.” She flipped down the vanity mirror and painted her lips a saucy red. “Why not look your best?”

“Bea, you always look good.”

“That Deputy Ruiz, she’s a nice-looking girl. Must be nice to be surrounded by men all day.”

Wise adjusted the rearview and saw the patrol car carrying the deputies pull up behind them. He heard the engine rev when they passed the Charger. The Sheltons, Lev, and Creed had already begun walking to Daisyland.

The sheriff leaned over and buckled in his passenger. “There you go, Bea.”

“That’s not necessary.” She unclipped it. “I haven’t got long, you know.”

Wise’s smile faded. “But...”

“Besides, I’m more likely to die in a meteor shower than a car wreck. You’re driving.” She reached over the gearbox and pinched his cheek. “Remember?”

“It’s the law.” He leaned over again and grabbed the strap. “We’re not going anywhere unless you buckle up.”

She sighed. “Fine.” Wise patted her hand, chewing his lip. Drops of rain fell on the windshield. “That wasn’t Nijinsky.”

“What?” He glanced at her as he twisted the key. The motor finally turned over.

“The cat. An impersonator. Just a shadow with flaming paws that resembled Nijinsky.” Her voice sounded unnaturally calm.

“Bea.”

She shuddered, then reached over and patted his hand. “It’s not him, poor old kitty. That thing was just a ball of energy. Not conscious. Not as I understand consciousness, anyways.”

“You’re saying the cat was, like...some kind of illusion, or...phantasm?” He shook his head as if he were rattling a jar of coins.

“Phil, for God’s sake. I don’t know exactly what it is. *Was*. Somehow fear feeds it. Organizes it. Like a golem. Makes it more solid. And I’ll tell you something else. The cat is no stranger than the killer.” She held out her hand, admiring her new French manicure. “Hands are still beautiful, don’t you think, Phil? Heck. I only have a few months to live, at most. Why not look my best?”

“Is the cat...evil?” asked Wise.

“I told you. It’s not a cat.” She shook her blue-gray head. In the light Wise could make out the beautician’s glitter coating her fresh curls. “It only appears to be one. A golem. No—it’s more like a hologram. From the power of animal magnetism.”

He listened to her séance plan for a few moments, the engine idling, then drove the two hundred yards down Burnt Chestnut and onto the circular oyster-shell drive. He maneuvered between two giant iron rendering pots flanking the front porch of Daisyland and parked.

“Well,” he began, but the words faded off as if sucked into a noise vacuum. He turned to Bea, clearing his throat. Their gazes locked. “It’s as though today the Earth is standing still.”

“The deaths were unnatural. And today itself, Phil, is unnatural.” She nodded like a schoolteacher and pointed to the locust shells lining the bottoms of the rendering pots. “Things are going from sublime to perilous.”

He grunted, then shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat. “I want you to tell me all about animal magnetism, Bea.”



A yellow tribe of jonquils bordered the dormant flowerbeds in front of Daisyland. Their heads nodded to one another in the damp breeze, conversing. Rachel stood on the ribbon of crushed shells, folded her arms and smiled to mask her worry. The deputies looked like two ne'er-do-well amigos and one spectacular amiga playing dress-up, coasting the two hundred yards down Burnt Chestnut, two in the front, one in the backseat of the Crown Victoria. At least they carried loaded rifles and knew how to use them. Presumably.

The boys sat on the brick steps of the wide front porch, waiting. Dave peered through one window into a gap between the curtain's edge and the window frame. "Nothing," he said.

A light rain had begun, but the drops were too small and scattered to matter.

"You're late." Creed smiled at Beatricia and Wise when at last they emerged from the sheriff's car.

"For good reason," said the sheriff.

Rachel unfolded her arms and peeled a loose chip of paint off the step with a fingernail, her eyes bloodshot and stinging, her forehead throbbing. Beatricia flashed her don't-you-dare-open-that-mouth look. Rachel frowned and held her tongue. It had made her ill to see Phil Wise help Beatricia from the car as if she were a princess and he, her courtier. Rachel turned away, put a hand to her chest and coughed. There was something wrong here:

a stench in the air, the scent of simmering, rancid fat. Treetops were all but invisible in the sooty miasma of overcast sky.

Zack and Leo wrestled and punched each other's arms, laughing. Rachel put a finger to her lips and blew a muffled "shush." They slumped and stared straight ahead, slack-jawed, a look they'd rehearsed and perfected in church.

Lev's eyes were bright and expressive. He had Bea's duffle slung over one shoulder, carrying the bag like a bellhop. His free hand gripped a plastic bottle of holy water with a gold cross on it. God, she thought. Not Lev, too.

"Listen up," said Beatrice, still arm-in-arm with the sheriff. "We all need to be on the same page before we go in."

"Go ahead, Mom," she said. There was no chance of being on the same page with her mother, but there was no sense in protesting. Beatrice had been a den mother for the Boy Scouts. *Just get this over with*, Rachel thought.

"Let's all try to work together," said Wise, letting Bea lean on his shoulder. "Look at all the possibilities."

"There she goes, flirting again," Rachel whispered to Dave. "Really, she's impossible. Even now." The boys chuckled. Lev and the sheriff looked down.

"Go on," Dave told Wise. Leo cocked a fist, about to punch Zack. Dave sighed, reached over and tapped his son's shoulder. "We're all going to listen, and without any snickering."

Beatrice took a deep breath, scanning the faces of her audience like a revivalist about to deliver a hellfire sermon to a congregation of snake handlers.

"The word 'séance' derives from the Old French word *seoir*, meaning to sit," she said, "and that's what we're all going to do." She drummed her nails on the handles of her canes. "But over the centuries the meaning has changed. Now we mean a group of people talking to the dead."

The swing creaked and swung in a puff of wind. Crockett, who'd had his nose buried in The Dalai Lama's *Little Book of Wisdom*, looked up. Ruiz applied a rosy lipstick to her lush lips as Leveaux fingered the blue glass beads around his neck, muttering prayers.

Rachel groaned. "We all know what a séance is, Mother." She hoped Bea had given up proselytizing years before, after Daddy

had died and then refused to haunt her. But no.

“What is not generally known,” said Beatrice, pushing her glasses up her ski slope nose with a finger, “is that there are two types of mediumship—trance and channeling.”

Zack smirked. Leo grabbed him around the neck and drove his knuckles into his scalp. Rachel lifted a forefinger to her lips and glared. “Stop it, you two.” They cringed, feigning fear, the whites of their eyes visible all the way around dark green irises.

“When channeling, the medium allows the spirit to take over her body and visit with the seekers in attendance.”

Oh God, thought Rachel. Her muscles tensed. She looked into the woods to the east and imagined hidden eyes peering between leaves and branches. *What a waste of time!* Fear itself was a waste of time. Her fingers twitched. She needed to find something to do with her hands.

“But I don’t channel.” Beatrice lifted her chin as she spoke. “I’m a trance medium— strictly.” Her eyebrows rose. “I’ll get a message from the spirit world but usually don’t remember it because information from the other side comes so quickly through the planchette. Lev and Mr. Creed will write down everything.” She looked at the two, who nodded.

“Check,” said Creed. His mouth relaxed, lips rounder than Rachel remembered. He knew the forest. Something inside told her Creed had the balls to help them.

“Okay,” said Lev, wiping sweat from his face. Rachel caught Beatrice and him staring—as if at once they’d recognized something familiar in one another. She felt a surge of acidic fear in the pit of her stomach. Or was it the burn of jealousy? Lev dutifully rummaged through the bag and pulled out two candles, a notebook and a pen. He tested the ink with a few scribbles and gave one to Creed.

“Purple ink,” said the rumored secret agent, buttoning the collar of his bloodied woolen woodcutter shirt. “Nice.”

“Today, I’ll use a spirit board,” said Bea. “Write down what’s spelled out. Now get inside and make a place to sit. I don’t like the look of these stairs.” She shifted her weight from one leg to the other, and from one cane to the other. “I know already this is a very confused spirit. And in great pain. It’s looking for something.”



Beatricia and Sheriff Wise led the group into the living room. Rachel followed, mind alive with bitten-off words that had ugly edges. The butter-yellow walls were busy with shadows. Everyone spread out in the huge living room like flower petals lifted by the fluttering draft of Japanese fans. Rachel found herself by the fireplace, closeted up with the scent of ashes.

“Not as cold as I expected in here,” said Creed, crossing toward the dining room, his rifle leading the way.

“You uncock that rifle, sir,” said the sheriff, shivering. “Maybe you’ll see how cold it can get. Or maybe not.”

“If it ain’t cocked, it ain’t ready,” said Creed, glancing at Rachel.

“You just wait a minute there, Mr. Creed,” said Wise, eyes fixed on the man’s trigger finger.

“Don’t worry, Sheriff. I know what I’m doing.” He exhaled a long, condensed breath. His face twisted. “Damn cold in here, all of a sudden.”

“You may work for the Feds. But I’m the law here. Uncock that rifle, now.”

Creed released the hammer. “Under the circumstances, you’re right, Sheriff.”

“Feels damn cold where I’m sittin’.” said Deputy Crockett,

his back to the fireplace. He stretched long arms behind him, reaching for warmth that wasn't there.

Rachel winced. Below Crockett's loose cuff an angry red boil marked the pale flesh of his wrist, like a living creature, risen from Exodus.

Rain tapped at the windows and roof.

Dave sniffed. "What's that burning stench?"

"Ain't nothin' burnin'." The sheriff glanced at the sofa and sighed. "If it were, the place would warm up."

Only then did the cold bite at Rachel's fingertips. She pulled her coat tight around her. It was as if a dry frost moved in pools that floated around the house. Everyone was shivering, but its touch still seemed personal. Downdrafts, she thought. The tiny bit of wind outside was finding cracks and crevices, now one, now another. Or one of Revel Petty's famous inventions, causing a commotion, yet unfound. Then again, perhaps she was imagining things. Likely that. Fear was cold, and dense too. It drew the heart's warmth. How? She didn't know. Some kind of mind- body thing. She would figure it out.

"Please sit in a circle," said Beatricia, also eyeing the sofa longingly. "Push the furniture out of the way."

Rachel recalled Revel Petty's skull spilled open, brains splattered on the wall. *Clean-up crew did a damn good job*, she thought, but still there were stains she hoped the children didn't notice. She wondered if the boys saw the gaping hole where the painting of Daisyland had hung.

The men scraped the grandfather clock aside and shoved an end table, then a long leather sofa against the yellow walls. Petty had been a tall man, Rachel remembered. A photograph of him sat on the mantle, still in place, apparently, despite the creepy rearrangement of the furniture. As if whoever killed him had wanted him to see what was happening to his house.

Rachel moved a salon chair to the wall without asking for help. Finally, a large space was cleared in the middle, lined by vacant furniture.

"Better, ma'am?" said Lev.

Beatricia cupped his cheek, and squeezed it. She leaned over and did the same to her two cringing grandsons.

"Everybody sit." She took the sheriff's arm again. "Phil,

lower me. Slowly, please.”

He held her, easing her into a kneeling position onto a pillow. Then thumped down beside her, heart-pine boards creaking under his weight. The others dropped to complete the circle.

For a moment, no one spoke. Only the sound of the creaking porch swing, suspended from rusty chains, crept into the house between sills and windows to fill Daisyland’s quiet spaces.

Gauzy dust gleamed like minuscule fairies in sunbeams slanting through wavy windowpanes that lit the spirit board with an oval of light.

“Perfect.” Beatrice cleared her throat. “First, we need to generate animal magnetism. It’s powerful. It can animate anything. Take the hand of the person on either side of you.” Rachel was last to obey, waiting until a hand on either side of her grew impatient and reached for hers.

Bea tapped her nails on the edge of the planchette and closed her eyes. “This isn’t truly the correct way to proceed, but it’s the best I can do.” She glanced over at Rachel. “Considering.”

The creaking stopped. No sounds came from outside; not since the wind had weakened.

“Don’t forget, Phil found the table upside-down like a dead cockroach,” Beatrice said. “Such disorder isn’t unusual. Books about ghosts report strange occurrences in old mausoleums. Coffins found standing on end, unshelved, scattered.”

“And you can explain that, Mother?”

“No need to be scornful, dear.” Beatrice smiled, eyes narrowing. “It would take the energy of the living to lift and slide coffins. Energy is expended in mausoleums. That is, physical energy. There’s also the energy of joy, grief, and pain. All human energy produces animal magnetism. In mausoleums, when the physical work is done, the expended effort is sealed up. Over time, it magnifies, waiting to be used by spirits, who have little of their own.”

Rachel lifted an eyebrow. “Spirits, Mother?”

“Ghosts,” said Beatrice. “A ghost is a spirit who uses deposits of animal magnetism and has a purpose, confused or not. A ghost can move things—coffins, machinery. A ghost who is confused moves things at random.”

“This house is not a mausoleum,” said Rachel.

“Exactly. There’s a great deal of energy because Mr. Petty suffered and died here. But the house is not sealed well and too little time has passed for energy to magnify. No, the ghost who killed Mr. Petty has gotten his strength from somewhere else.”

“Not the magnetic generator?” Rachel snickered.

“Long gone,” said Wise.

“So that’s your explanation?” Creed smirked. “What about a band of bad guys—like, a home invasion?”

“Why would the furniture have been moved, Mr. Creed?” Beatricia frowned at the two boys, who were poking each other in the ribs. They straightened up like good little Prussian soldiers, eyes forward, grins wiped from their faces.

“Creed’s right,” said Rachel. “We’ve destroyed a crime scene for this crock of shit?”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Dave.

“I’m offering a theory.” Beatricia closed her eyes serenely. “Let’s see what happens. We’re adding our personal energy to that which has already been festering here. It’s growing exponentially. Like debt.”

She waved her palms over the board. “I’m clearing the energy so the spirits can transmit.

Now quiet,” she said, voice descending. “Concentrate on calling a spirit to tap into that energy.” She peeked at Rachel. “And if you can’t do that, just try to empty your mind. Focus on your breathing.”

“Really, Mother.”

“Quiet. Concentrate.”

Rachel’s hands fisted into a white-knuckled clench, and she flattened her lips in concentration. She had never felt the need to test the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, even as a teenager. Beatricia had tried to arrange consultations with priests to help her combat her night terrors, but Rachel had refused, dismissing the clergy as well meaning, perhaps, but, at the end of the day, delusional, no better than mediums.

“We should be doing something to protect ourselves from the killer, not wasting our time with Victorian parlor games,” she said.

“Stifle yourself, dear,” Beatricia snapped. “We are doing as you wish, even if it’s not the way you think it should be done.”

Rachel lowered her head, so her mother could not see her eyes through the shroud of fallen hair. “Sorry.”

Beatricia fixed her gaze straight ahead on the window overlooking the jonquils in the front yard, then began slow, deep abdominal breathing. “I am emptying my mind,” she said. “And coiling the serpent of energy at the base of my spine. There’s a small ball of fire, like a miniature sun, appearing in the glass of the living room window. Rolling between the panes, spinning like a dreidel. I don’t know what it is, but suddenly I’m freezing.”

Beatricia’s fingertips quivered as she touched them lightly on the edges of the planchette.

A dagger of ice just punctured my heart, thought Rachel, figuratively.



Rachel wiggled, cross-legged, and squeezed her eyes shut. The sooner this is over, the better off we'll be, she thought. She suppressed the same frenetic energy that often caused her to hyperventilate and shout or cry, driving Wolfie to his pantry. Dave squeezed her hand harder. Did that mean shut up and get on with the charade, or was he offering support? Well, she would be quiet, cooperate like the others.

Their feelings seemed transparent. Sheriff Wise was worried about this little gathering being a violation of legal protocol. Creed had been laughing with his eyes. Lev alone seemed truly reverent. Perhaps his Jewish upbringing had brought him to respect all trappings of religious ritual, even this one, in spite of his loss of faith. Her boys were both suppressing laughter and waiting for something extraordinary to happen. Leo because of his age, no doubt. And Zack? She frowned. He seemed to be hoarding some delicious, mysterious secret.

Her mother put one hand on her lower abdomen and pressed, exhaling through parted lips. A minute or two went by. Then Rachel heard the faint hiss of the planchette moving over the wooden surface of the spirit board. She opened her eyes to see it was pointing out one letter after another, so quickly she failed to unscramble them into words, the words into sentences.

Everyone else watched, wide-eyed. The planchette was

moving with such sure purpose, it was impossible to believe her mother was not consciously controlling it.

At last, Beatricia's hand stopped.

"I'm done," she murmured, sagging. She sat for a moment looking dumbfounded, stunned. Then shifted her gaze from the window down to the planchette as if she'd forgotten what it was. She lifted her fingers; the nails were pink acrylic, white-tipped. But her fingertips looked purple.

"Really?" Rachel inspected her mother, assessed her condition. She looked like a dry orchid, droopy, brittle, sad. She was so cold, blood vessels in her hands had constricted, the skin on the tops were gooseflesh.

"Did anyone get the message?" Beatricia frowned sharply at Dave as though he was a schoolchild caught daydreaming.

"Too fast for me," he said.

Then, untouched, the planchette moved. Inchmeal, at first. "Look," said the sheriff.

Beatricia stared. "God in Heaven."

The planchette seemed spurred on by their comments. It picked up speed, as though it were in a supernatural race, as though it couldn't spit out words fast enough. Yet so fast it seemed to stutter *p-p-p-a-a-a-a-s-s-s-s-o-o-o-v-v-v-e-e-e-r-r-r*.

"Passover," whispered Rachel.

"Fire!" screamed Beatricia, thrusting her frozen hands away from her as flames leapt up first from the tips of her nails, then from both palms.

Wise jumped to his feet and removed his coat. He threw it over her hands and smothered the flames.

The planchette circled the board, then took off like a trapped hummingbird and whizzed around the room.

Rachel reached for her mother and discovered her own fingertips, once frozen, aflame.

Cries of *fire* blurted from everyone's lips as all the hands in the room spontaneously ignited.

Now the planchette was slamming into walls, cracking the yellow paint, denting the plaster. Rachel saw a golden orb rotating just inside the window. The planchette whizzed by her head like a wild bat and smashed into a windowpane, as if

spooked by the circle of fire, shattering the glass to thousands of icy shards. Then, it disappeared into the sooty afternoon sky.

Beatricia fell into Wise's arms. "Did you get it, Phil?" she gasped.

"I was lost," said the sheriff, still trying to blow out the red and blue flames on his hands. Everyone else did the same, shouting in horror and slapping their hands together or against their clothing.

"Didn't you get it?" Rachel said to her mother. "Weren't you supposed to get the message and interpret it?"

"No, I wasn't. I've already told you I couldn't, before we started."

Beatricia belonged in a hospital. She was curled up on her pillow, leaning heavily against the ample sheriff. Rachel had seen ICU patients who'd looked better after a big heart attack.

"I'm just the medium," Beatricia sounded flustered, unsure of herself for the first time that day.

"Well, I got it," said Lev, gazing at the ten tiny yellow flames sputtering at the tips of his spread fingers. "Most of it, I think."

"Oh, I got it too," said Creed, amusement still plain in his eyes, ignoring his ashy palms. There was no sensation of burning, not even a smidgen of it. There had been nothing to feel, except the icy cold, even when the flames had sprung, newly born.

The boys were laughing, examining each other's nails as the sparks fizzled out, their hair standing on end.

"You're good boys." Beatricia lowered her eyelids for a moment, as if drifting in and out of a morphine-laced sleep.

"Let's go get it." Creed stood up and began checking the loads in his rifle. He had a wide smile, and his eyes were sparkling. "May all be bullshit. But it'd be worth it if it's not."

He was ready to strike out, Rachel thought. A bantam set to fight a wolf pack, not just to achieve an end, but to please and prove himself.

"The message was, to the effect," said Lev, in slow, incantatory, rabbinical tones, "... that *in the stretch of woods east of the Ewell house...there is a force. This force cannot be stopped...and it is coming like a judgment to the Shelton house. We must find its source.* The spirit board has given exact coordinates."

“I can take us there with my GPS,” said Creed.

Rachel smelled ashes, her nose wrinkling. Ashes in the cold, swept fireplace, falling in flurries of snow from the ceiling, silent, invisible.

Thunder rolled across the sky, as if in response to the prophecy.

Rachel sniffed the charred tips of her nails. Weird, yes. But so were Petty’s house and inventions. She wasn’t comforted by the thought that the sheriff’s department had supposedly cleaned things out. There was probably a magnetic generator hidden under the floor, perhaps hidden in wet ashes, far too close to her boys.

Something seized her shoulders and shook her. But why should she believe such things?

If Ouija boards were things to go by, Beatrice would have already won the One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge. *Open portals, my ass*, she thought.

••••

Zack sat on the front porch of the Shelton house, swinging hard, boiling with anger. His mother and grandmother had gone into the kitchen with Leo. The deputies were spreading themselves out, arrayed about the farm with their rifles. He was old enough and tough enough to have gone into the woods with Dave, Lev, Creed, and the sheriff, but here he sat, left behind with no consolation but the lie on Dave’s part that he was needed at home to look after Beatrice, Leo, and his mother.

The splatterings of rain that reached him on the swing were refreshing but not cooling. He felt burnt, embarrassed, worthless, and not a little ashamed to be treated as a child. Leo was having lunch. Zack didn’t want any. He’d refused to answer when his mother called. If he wanted a chicken salad sandwich with almonds, he could make it himself, maybe with his pocketknife to show he didn’t care about rules.

The ambulance-chasing attorney, Tripper Enwright, pulled up into the gravel driveway in his red Corolla with the flip-up headlights burning and its windshield wipers flapping. Zack wanted to wave him away, but knew Enwright wouldn’t leave

for a while, no matter what. Not after driving all the way from Onancock to Zebulon in the light rain and wasting all that gas. What a tightwad. What a cheesy car.

Behind the windshield, the guy's head wobbled like a bobble head on a coiled spring. The door opened a couple of inches. Then the man pushed it open with his knees and arm. Zack looked away to avoid being noticed.

Fat chance, Zack thought. Enwright sprang out of the car and headed to the porch, a newspaper over his head catching the rain.

"Anybody home?" he said.

"Nope," Zack shook his hand. "Only my brother, my mother, my grandmother, and most of the sheriff's department."

"Oh, dear," said Enwright, "Guess I'd better come up there to keep you company."

Enwright's head was not only too big for his body, it was almost bald except for the jet-black stubble on his chin that looked painted on with a brush. He had small black eyes that looked poked into the clay of his face and wore a dark coat and tie with a handkerchief peeking from a breast pocket.

Enwright was good at standing up at public meetings and mouthing off about anything with stupid jokes that made old people laugh. Zack had heard him speak at school assemblies, at church, at picnics, at the community center in Hope, at PTA meetings, at political rallies, and at other places to which he'd been dragged, and was particularly grossed out when weird Mr. Enwright was called "cute" by old ladies.

"My mother's not at home."

"Oh, I guess she is." Enwright stepped onto the porch, head wobbling. "Can you get her for me?"

"No," said Zack. "You can knock on the door yourself."

"All right, I will." He faced the door and knocked on it loudly enough to be heard over the sound of the rain, coming harder now, each second, as if to protect Rachel from this badly formed intruder.

"There are things your mother should know in this troubled time," continued Enwright. "I'm here to inform her. I've seen fit to make the trip all the way from Onancock in spite of the danger, which speaks well for me—you'll be kind enough to agree."

Zack sat sullenly on the swing, not agreeing, as the eyebolts holding the chains of the swing to the porch ceiling groaned, adding more groans to the house.

Rachel appeared at the door in an apron and stepped out onto the porch. She sent Zack indoors with a look and took his seat on the swing. She offered Enwright the porch chair beside her with a gesture of her hand. Instead of retreating into the depths of the house, Zack pulled up a dining-room chair and sat beside the cracked front door, where he could keep an eye on Enwright. Seated in the porch chair, the attorney seemed a scrawny, mythical creature with a head so big it appeared almost hydrocephalic. He had two great big floppy feet like a clown's.

"You know, of course," said Enwright, "Your stable hand, Lev, is Jewish."

"Jesus Christ," muttered Zack. He had heard Enwright speak of Jews enough times to know what would follow. His stomach turned and growled. The Jews of Enwright's imagination were fat, hook-nosed and as hairy as the fungus, "Hairy Jew's ear." They had huge, sloppy lips and curly black hair. Covered with boils and warts and unclean sores, they concealed their horns with hats and their hooves with oversized shoes. As for forked tails, they must be tucked down a pants leg or hidden by long-tailed jackets. Zack snorted. *Funny in a disgusting sort of way.*

Enwright eyed Rachel and whispered, "Jews are always liars. They've murdered our children as well as our Lord. Now they want to be called the Children of God and take dominion over us all."

"Stop right there." Rachel held up a hand. "I won't listen to such things at my house, or anywhere else."

"I'm trying to save you," he said. "They know how to manipulate minds. Every radical movement since 1945 has had either a Jew out front of it or a Jew behind it, tricking some Goyim into mouthing his words. They've taken over banking, education, the press, libraries, Hollywood, the Freemasons, television, the major political parties in America, and the army. Like the Indian god Vishnu, Jews are possessed of hundreds of hands, each of which feels the pulse of public opinion. They control the markets. This Jew of yours, Lev, has been sent to mislead, to destroy you. A time bomb ticking away in your house."

“I would like you to leave, Mr. Enwright,” Rachel said.

Listening from the crack of the porch door, Zack felt his hands curl into fists. “Call me Tripper.”

“Please leave.”

“Have you read the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*?” said Enwright.

“Why should I?” said Rachel. “They’re an anti-Semitic hoax. A forgery. No learned elders met in the nineteenth century, or at any other time, to plot world domination. There was no meeting at the Prague cemetery, no cigar. Only hatred and prejudice against Jews, which people like you help keep alive.”

Enwright yanked at his hair and his huge head bounced up and down. “I’ve come here to give you a warning.” His voice rose. “I’ve seen what Jews do in my legal practice. It doesn’t matter who wrote the protocols or why; what matters is that they reflect the truth. Jews cooperate with each other, internationally, in commerce. They control money and land, and formulate propaganda. Through their magazines and news shows, as well as their sitcoms, they create false ideologies to pit Gentiles one against the other while they make off with the loot.”

Zack almost laughed. He saw a smile come to his mother’s lips. Enwright was such a tool.

“You mean people like Freud, Karl Marx, the followers of Darwin and Jewish colleagues of Stephen Hawking?” she mused. “The Jews behind Roosevelt?”

“That’s right!” Enwright beamed, as if he’d proved a point. “Psychology, Communism, Evolution, the New Deal, the atheism of Stephen Hawking—all ideologies designed to divide and confuse non-Jews. Jews support those things and debunk them as well. All parts of an act to make every one else in the world vulnerable.”

Zack and Rachel both laughed. Enwright’s face reddened under its black stubble.

“Jews study the Jew television show, *Seinfeld*. They see the Jew, Seinfeld, as a psychiatrist leading the neurotic Christian, George Costanza, into confusion, joking about him, speaking to him ironically. They learn how to master us and destroy our society and culture, thus take over. This is how it is with the Jew. You will not survive this night unless you send your Jew away.

That is all I have come to tell you.”

“Go home,” said Rachel. “I don’t want you here.”

“Neither do I,” said Zack, opening the door. “If there’s anyone here secretly involved in something bad, it’s you.”

“I’m—”

“You are.”

“I resent what you’re saying, son.”

“Your head is too big,” said Zack. “It’s filled with water.”

“Zack’s right,” Rachel said, “It’s too big.”

Two minutes later, Enwright’s red Corolla was pulling out of the Sheltons’ driveway in the rain, on its way back to Onancock.



Dave stood stunned as if a board had slammed him in the face, his yellow rain-slick glossy and shiny with rainwater. He gasped at the half-hidden shack in a clearing of thick woods a half hour deep in the forest to the east of Ewell's house. He stared back at the men, then dug in a pocket for his phone and took a picture of the clapboard ruin.

Creed was standing under the anemic shelter of a pin oak. He checked the coordinates with his GPS, then panned the clearing in the hardwoods with the scope of his rifle.

The sheriff was stuck between the branches of two soggy elms that had grown together. He lifted a heavy arm to clear thorns of sweet briar out of his way, then heaved a great thigh out of a patch of wet poison ivy.

"My God," said Lev, mouth hanging open. He broke free from the underbrush behind the sheriff and moved up next to Creed, bumping his rifle.

"Back off, Lev," said Creed, pointing his Winchester at the remains of the quiet, waiting house.

The sheriff leaned against a large hollow trunk, widened his stance, and cocked his pistol.

Before them, in the drizzle, stretched a line of low split-rails painted black. Whole sections were missing, others pushed over by wind. Beyond the fence a chimney rose, its mortar

crumbling, bricks slashed by soot. Beneath the chimney grew a chaos of brambles. Charred timbers, half-decayed, lay like forgotten soldiers slain in battle. Obscured by new growths of chokecherries and wild blackberries, the rubble of a fire had oozed its blackened mass over the house's foundation.

Behind the ruin, loblolly pines swayed high above the chimney, their trunks painted black and scorched by fire. Nailed to the surrounding trees were scraps of rotted clapboard, each with a faded, painted image—naked women, with long necks, no facial features, and no nipples or pubic hair. Red paint splattered waving blades of orange flame against a background of gray brick walls. Crimson holes were bored into the foreheads of featureless faces. A baby was being torn from its mother by a pair of hands in cuffed white gloves.

Lev freed himself from a thorn that'd hooked a pants leg and crept over the fallen logs and rocks and swept his eyes over the panorama of faded murals. "This whole scene is a depiction of the Holocaust," he said, squinting at the weathered paintings.

Dave's eyes fixed on the tiny emblems on the cuffs of the white gloves. "*Swastikas?*" Dave's heart jumped in the throes of an eureka moment. This was the place that had caused everything. This place held the answer. Dave studied Wise's face. He probably knew it too. He was probably putting it all together with secrets only he knew. He looked at Wise.

"Damn it, Sheriff. Did you know about this? Don't you think it's about time you open your trap and let the rest of us know what's going on?"

"I didn't know about this," said the sheriff. "I don't know how it fits into anything." He pulled a burr off his pants. "But I'd bet dollars to donuts it does."

"So what else, Sheriff?" said Dave.

"What else what?" said Wise.

"What do you have tucked down your pants you're not telling us, Sheriff?"

"Now listen here," said Wise. "Everything I know is so out beyond the breakers even I have trouble believing it. So I'm not passing it along until I'm sure."

"Yeah." Lev stared off into the woods, eyes unfocused as if he were lost in thought.

“What about those holes in the ground?” Dave blinked away the streaks of rain that blurred his vision and pointed toward a grassy mound interrupted by depressions, as if great bites had been taken out of the earth.

“Looks like an old family cemetery,” said Creed. He climbed over fallen logs and brush to the edge of the foundation. “Graves sink after the pine boxes decay. Be careful. Might be skeletons in those holes.”

“But I don’t see any headstones or crosses,” said Dave.

“Broken.” Creed shivered, his wool jacket heavy with rain. “Or maybe rotted away.”

Lev snapped out of his daze and watching his step, walked to the nearest painting. He pulled off a glove and ran a finger down the side of the sodden wood. “No signature. But there’s something.”

“What kind of something?” Dave tore through a patch of high rye on the perimeter of the clearing. The grass smelled moldy even in the rain. He yanked some seeds off a head and put them to his nose and inhaled. He coughed.

“Well,” said the sheriff. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. And I’m glad I haven’t.”

“Reminds me of one of two things.” Lev mused on the image of the mother and the child and the specter of the white gloves. “Could be the hand of a Nazi soldier ripping a baby away from his mother. Or an Egyptian baby being torn away by the angel of death.”

“Didn’t know angels wore gloves,” said the sheriff.

“Didn’t think the angel of death was a Nazi,” said Creed.

Dave realized he’d bitten his tongue at the moment he tasted blood. The whole miserable day had become a prolonged nightmare. He twisted the red string he’d allowed Beatrice to tie on his wrist. He wasn’t a religious man, but knew that true believers found comfort in such talismans. Now he was glad he had one.

“See the serpents coiling at the mother’s feet?” said Lev. “Could be Egyptian, you know. Remember the Egyptian priests who laid down their staffs at Pharaoh’s feet after Aaron’s slithered off?”

“Don’t recall that one,” said Creed. “And what do swastikas

have to do with Egypt?”

“It was originally Egyptian. A solar sign.”

Creed frowned. “How do you know all this?”

“He wasn’t always a stable manager,” said Dave, spitting blood from his mouth and rubbing a raw spot on his tongue with a gloved finger.

Lev shrugged.

“No, really,” said Creed.

“My parents used to drag me to synagogue three times a week. Four years of Hebrew School. I quit after my bar mitzvah. I became an engineering student.”

“So you’re a Hebrew scholar?” said Creed.

“No. An unemployed civil engineer. I live in an apartment in a barn, and I’m dating a Methodist. I’ve forgotten almost everything.”

“This place gives me the creeps.” Dave looked into the darkening sky and shuddered, as if he felt some poisoned arrow had swooped down from the sky and pierced his heart. His chest hurt. His feet grew heavy. His legs became numb.

Musn’t let on. Musn’t let the others know. Must be the way Wise feels too, Dave thought. *Maybe I’ve been too hostile.* An attack was coming from somewhere just out of view, invisible. And the attacker was who? Or what?

“Phil, I have a suspicion what we’re dealing with is not quite human.”

The sheriff’s eyes darted, then fixed on Dave’s face. Wise coughed, then nodded.

“We need to search this entire place,” said Lev.

Creed guffawed. “I can’t believe the old lady put us onto this. She’s probably known about the place for years. Probably used to picnic here with her boyfriend.”

“She’s a true believer,” Dave said. “Not a practical joker.”

Creed curled his lip and raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me you think your mother-in-law has used a Ouija board to pinpoint the dump some nut-job is using as a base to kill off his neighbors?”

“I didn’t say that.” Dave shrugged. “I’m just saying she wouldn’t try to fool us on purpose. Whatever she did or said, right or wrong, she believes. Don’t doubt that for a minute.”

“I think she’s a whack job,” said Creed. Phil Wise grimaced and looked away.

“There could be a scientific explanation,” said Creed. “A climactic disturbance. An electrical charge that accumulated and sent all the metal in the room flying.”

Dave laughed.

“What about the finger flames?” said Lev.

“Everyone was wearing a ring,” Dave pointed out. “Even the kids. I don’t know. Seemed real. Might have been an electrical storm. But maybe not.”

“What about you, Sheriff?” Creed asked.

“I don’t think anything yet,” said the sheriff. “I’m still looking things over. When I can, I take testimony. When I have enough, I’ll set my mind to sortin’ it out. What I want to know right now is how old these paintings are.”

Dave scratched his head and studied the paintings. “Well. This is older than it might look to you. High-quality outdoor latex paint. Even has a base coat. No peeling—just fading. Painted in layers. See? The negative space, the sky and earth, were painted first. Pretty good for Zebulon. I’ve seen work like this sell for thousands at outsider art expos in New York. I think they’re at least twenty years old. Nailed up with heavy-duty iron and decades of rust.” He scratched a nail head and brushed reddish-black powder off his fingers.

The sheriff patted his gun belt through his cold, wet slicker. “Then whoever did this work is most likely forty years old or older.”

“But he can’t be too old,” said Creed. “Not if he’s the killer.”

“Why’s that?” Lev shivered. “It’s getting cold.”

“Because no old man could kill those people,” said Dave.

“Or move all that furniture, acting alone,” said Wise, mumbling. “Unless...”

Dave looked at the sheriff. The man had an idea. It probably came from Bea. It was probably weird as shit.

“I got a new theory,” said Creed. “This site doesn’t have anything to do with the killer. That little house over there looks like it burned down years ago. Nobody’s been here for twenty years or more. The old lady is bat-shit crazy. Either that or she’s just trying to seem important.”

“Well, that’s not it.” Dave squirmed. His collar was choking him, scratching his neck. He was unaccustomed to defending his mother-in-law. It made him itchy. “I know Beatrice is eccentric, yes—but she was right about Cardinals winning the World Series. She was so confident, she bet ten thousand dollars on it. And tried to get us to bet the farm. I’m not kidding.”

“She’s the killer.” Creed laughed.

“Well, let’s not get too far off the subject,” said Sheriff Wise. “You boys pull the nets in together. Lev, you go over and check out those big things over there nailed to those trees. You know, those shields with the eyes painted on them. Dave, walk around and check out every inch of grass. Then figure out why the fence is black. When it was painted. It sure as hell ain’t been twenty years. Creed, stand right where you are. Cock your rifle. Be ready to shoot.”

“Okay, Sheriff.” Creed grinned.

Dave looked over at Creed. The little man liked to take orders, especially if they had to do with holding a rifle.

“But try not to shoot yourself.” The sheriff took the Glock out of his holster, checked his clip, then returned it to its leather sheath.

“You can kiss my butt, Sheriff.” Creed raised his rifle and swept the perimeter.

Dave didn’t like the idea of splitting up, but it was already afternoon and the sun had begun to sink behind the darkening rain clouds.

He squatted in the grass, scraping at the concrete base of a fence post with the blunt end of one of his car keys. A dandelion had crept around his ankle, tugging at his jeans, as if it intended to capture his attention. He gasped and cut its wet stalk with his key, then stood abruptly.

“The fence is twenty years old, or more,” he called out to the sheriff. “The post was painted the day it was embedded. There are paint drops mixed into the cement.”

The sheriff hiked to the top of the pile of burnt rubble that had once been a house, like a goat mounting a hill of garbage. “Whatcha got, Lev?”

“God’s eyes. Hamesh hands.” Lev lifted his voice from a spot between two looming pines, tilted as if they would tumble down

at any moment and crush him. “Jewish symbol of protection from the old evil eye. Ancient.”

Dave walked up behind Lev to study the symbols. “Interesting art.” The shields were edged with bands of repeating sequences—hands, feathers, cats, scarab beetles, and pintail ducks. In the center of each was a faded golden eye that was itself shield shaped, but tipped on its side.

“Keep looking,” yelled the sheriff. He walked down the hill of spongy, burnt detritus.

From its edges, he began pulling out pieces of blackened timber.

“What do ya' see?” yelled Creed.

“Something's under here,” said the sheriff. “Come help me.”

Everyone dropped what he was doing and headed toward the sheriff, who was yanking burnt clapboard off the pile. “Help me clear this debris. Think I've found a hatch.”

Wise rolled up his sleeves and wiped rain from his brow. Lev, Dave, and Creed walked to the pile and leaned their rifles against a dead tree.

“Not you, Creed. Keep that rifle in your hands. Be ready to use it. You just never know.”

David and Lev helped the sheriff pull back timbers and kick away pieces of roof. Soon, they cleared a cellar door split in two parts, each having a handle made from a scrap of pine with a rusty nail driven through the middle of it. They hoisted both sides and lay them back like pinned moth wings, then peered into the pitch black hole. They all stepped back.

Wise grimaced. “Now who wants to be the first one down there?”

Dave got a whiff of rising musk from the floor. He sneezed. Dave peered into the gloom and his pulse quickened with both fear and fascination. “I'll go.” The mystery of the cellar was as magical as it was dangerous. He was simultaneously attracted and repulsed and he imagined skeletons and old torture devices and then forgotten treasures all somehow blossoming without light.

“Step aside,” said Lev. “You're too heavy. The ladder probably can't take it.”

“Thanks a lot.” Dave clicked on the penlight on his keychain

and swung the beam into the space like a slow pendulum, illuminating a bare dirt floor and a descending ladder of vertical timbers and crude cross planking.

The sheriff touched Lev on the shoulder. "That wood looks flimsy. You sure you wanna go?"

"Why wouldn't I want to go?"

"Well, maybe you think there's spooks down there," said the sheriff.

Creed reached up and put his palm on Lev's chest. "Stop. No one's going down that death ladder. Spooks my ass." He gripped the fabric of Lev's raincoat. "Sheriff, the only thing you're gonna get by sending this young man down there is a kid with a broken neck. You're supposed to be protecting these people. Not exposing them to more risk."

"I'm in charge of this investigation. This looks like a sound ladder. If we don't proceed, we'll never get to the bottom of this investigation, Creed. Lives are at stake."

"This is not on me, Sheriff." Creed took his hand back and pointed at the sheriff. "Anything happens it's your fault. No matter what you say, Sheriff Wise, I think you believe in spooks. You're like that old woman."

"Mr. Creed, you're tellin' me you don't believe in spirits?"

"I didn't say that. I took down those coordinates from Mrs. Fulbright's Ouija board because I was asked to. I don't believe Mrs. Fulbright's parlor game can tell us how to find a ghost."

"I'm more concerned there might be a living human being down there," said Lev.

Dave switched the light back on and searched the corners of the pit with its weak beam.

"Ain't no livin' flesh down there." Wise unhitched his flashlight from his belt, clicked it on, and lit the center and the corners of the room with a single powerful shaft of light. "That junk atop the door has been there for twenty years or more."

"That's some battery you got there, Sheriff."

"Yup." The sheriff reached behind his neck and unclasped a bronze chain from which dangled a small guardian-angel amulet. He held it out to Lev.

"I don't need that, Sheriff."

"Maybe you do."

“All right, I’ll take it if it makes you happy.” Lev took the chain and without looking at it fastened the amulet around his neck. “Thanks. Now, out of my way.” Lev got on the first rung and in less than five seconds was on the dirt floor, looking up. “The ladder’s no problem.”

Dave stared into the pit and took in a breath. Even lit by the sheriff’s flashlight, the cellar appeared deep, and ominous, like a black-and-white chamber from a cheap Hollywood movie.

Creed climbed down next, grumbling, followed by Dave, and, finally, the sheriff. Wise’s bulk caused the rungs to creak. They found themselves on a cold surface of frozen dirt. Their breaths were visible in the air. Creed’s teeth chattered. Their shadows, cast by the single flashlight in a danse macabre, bounced like echoes from wall to wall. The old brick walls were tapestries with reeking black fungus. Only inches overhead, the remains of oak plank flooring were bowed from years of bearing the weight of the house’s sprawling corpse.

“Today is Passover,” said Lev, as if he realized something very important. “It’s Passover. I’d forgotten.”

Dave chuckled. He’d been wondering when someone would bring that up.

“What did you say?” said Creed.

“I said today is Passover,” Lev repeated, firmly.

“What does that have to do with what we’re doing?” asked Creed.

“Everything,” said Lev. “Everything we’ve seen and everything that’s going to happen.”

“How’s that?” said Wise.

“Let’s search first,” said Lev. “Then I’ll tell you what I know.”

The investigation, lit by the Surefire C2, took two minutes. The only thing in the basement was a shelf built into a wall and a black leather salesman’s case with rusted brass buckles.

Dave dusted off the old box. “Lev, grab one end.”

They swung the display case onto the shelf. Creed pried open the latch with his pocketknife.

The compartmentalized satchel held pages of photographs cut from books and periodicals, a stack of newspapers, and a single magazine dated 1963, *The New York Magazine of the Arts*.

The sheriff shone the light onto the tattered, water-stained photographs as Dave flipped through them, uncovering piles of the naked and the dead from Treblinka, Belsen, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Buchenwald, Dachau.

“The guy who lived here was some kind of son of a bitch,” muttered Creed.

“Not necessarily.” Lev turned his eyes away from a torn picture of birds feeding on a heap of emaciated children in an open grave. “He may’ve had relatives who were victims of the Holocaust.”

“Look here,” said Dave, scanning more pages with his tiny lamp—photos and articles about concentration camps, its victims and murderers. “Our guy was really obsessed.”

“Check the magazines,” said Lev.

Dave switched on the penlight and flipped to one of the magazine’s tables of contents. “There’s an article here by a man rescued from Belsen at the age of four.”

“That’s enough for me.” The sheriff put a hand on his gun. “Put it all back into the case. We’ll look closer at the house.” He focused his beam on the top rung of the ladder. “Now, let’s get outta here.”

Dave collected the pages and stacked them, placed them in the box, and clicked the lid. His lips were dry and cracking. “Getting out of here’s a good idea. We need to make it back before dark.” The thought wrapped its icy arms around him and he couldn’t shake himself loose. The Holocaust.

He carried the salesman’s case to the ladder and started up the rungs.



Zack sat at one end of the dining room table, practicing his finger picking, playing phrases from Appalachian bluegrass tunes. His mother sat next to him, hunched over a tray of milk and cookies, separating her Oreo Double Stuffs and eating the tops first, then smashing the other two halves together to make a quadruple stuff. Grandma Beatricia was ignoring everyone again, dealing out cards to herself, turning them over, one by one. *The Good Witch of the East strikes again*, Zack thought.

She turned over The Tower and let out a little *hmpph*.

She pressed a palm to the side of her face. “Dave’s been gone too long. I don’t trust those four together. Creed’s a loose cannon.”

Rachel groaned and rolled her eyes. “Mom, you’re making me nervous with those greasy cards.”

“I think Grandma’s cards are cool.” Zack bent a blue note.

“Ya’ got that right,” said Crockett, looking up from the *Little Book of Wisdom*.

“Whatever are you talking about, Rachel?” Beatricia arched an eyebrow and resumed shuffling the golden deck.

There they go again, Zack thought, *like a couple of wolf bitches*. He played an arpeggio from Bach’s *Air on the G string* for harpsichord at triple speed. He figured this would impress Isabel *and* the hot girl deputy. The adults had no clue what was

going on here. Five times since the Harper twins had died, he'd seen the tire swing in the neighbor's backyard swaying high and wide for minutes at a time under an invisible rider.

"The sheriff's been on the wrong track all day," said Rachel.

"That's a little harsh, Doc," said Ruiz.

"Sheriff Wise is the only one on the right track, Mom," said Zack.

"Poor Lev looks exhausted," she said, ignoring everyone. She flicked a black crumb off her shirt. "He should've taken the train to New York yesterday."

"I'll get those." Zack rose, the guitar still hanging over one shoulder by its strap like a gun belt. He carried her dish and cup to the kitchen and dropped them into the soapy water that filled the sink, then grabbed Dave's binoculars from the windowsill. He panned the back forty for any hint of movement on the western fringe of the woods, but saw only the wall of trees.

He hustled back to the dining room and turned on all the floor lamps, driving some of the darkness into corners. Beatrice was frowning at a row of nine cards that ended with the Ten of Swords. The three deputies sat sipping coffee at the other end of the table, Ruiz drumming her fingers on the leather pad. Rachel knocked over the peppershaker, frowned, and swept the grains into a palm and left the table. Zack could see that Deputy Leveaux was the only other person in the room to notice when Grandma Bea slapped down the next and final card, Judgment Day. Leveaux's golden-brown eyes darted over the spread.

Deputy Crockett tapped a Sasquatch-sized toe on the floor.

Zack slipped out of the guitar strap and rested the instrument against the wall in a corner. Leveaux sang out "Babalu."

"That's some Ricky Ricardo imitation, Francois," said Beatrice, looking up.

"No," he said, a tincture of Haitian creeping into his Eastern Virginia accent. He fingered the string of blue and white translucent glass beads around his neck. "It's Santeria."

Beatrice made a shooping gesture at the card with her knotty fingers.

"And that's The Final Judgment," he said, pointing at the spread, pupils dilating. Sweat bubbled out on his forehead, the

whites of his eyes enlarging.

Three Winchesters were leaning against the table in a tight, orderly row. As if of its own volition, one slid along the edge, felling the other rifles like dominoes.

“Oh!” exclaimed Leveaux, trying to catch them with an outstretched arm, but too late. He inhaled through thick plum lips the color of spoiled meat. His heavy chest rose and held its breath as the rifles clattered to the floor. At last, he bent and picked his rifle up.

Is he afraid, Zack thought, that the guns will be contaminated when they had been on the floor for more than three seconds, like food?

Crockett smiled, leaned down, picked up the other two with his long fingers and handed one to Ruiz. “You’re gettin’ jumpy, ain’t you, Leveaux?”

Leveaux pointed at the last card in Beatricia’s spread and rose from the table. “Guess I’d better have a look around the barn.”

“Go right ahead,” said Crockett, smirking.

Without another word, Leveaux took his rifle and left through the kitchen, pulling the back door quietly shut behind him.

“I want to go out and shoot baskets,” said Leo, bouncing down the stairs. He landed with a thud in the foyer.

“Not now,” said Rachel.

“Come on, Mom,” he whispered, trying to spin the orange and black ball on the tip of an index finger.

“Not today,” said Rachel. “You have to stay inside. Go put your toys away.”

“Don’t call them that, Mom. We’re too old for toys.” Zack turned to his mother and locked eyes. “You’ve said so a million times. I’m going to sit on the porch.”

“No.” Rachel’s eyes hardened. “You have the habit of asserting gravitas. You demand too much freedom. It’s premature. You’re only fourteen.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You want special treatment,” she said. “To be a man. But you’re still a boy.”

“The bottom line, Mom,” said Zack, stretching to his full five feet ten inch frame, “is that you want me to stay a kid. Those

days are gone. It scares Dave he won't be able to tell me what to do forever. He's not my dad and never will be."

"If that's your perception," said Rachel. "You're entitled to it. But—"

"Forget it," said Zack, heading for the staircase in the foyer. "I'm gonna go shave."

Rachel followed behind him. "Stop it, Zack. If you want to shave, use the bathroom downstairs."

He stopped, saying nothing, looking at the ceiling.

He didn't need to shave. He wanted to talk to his ghost friend, Isabel, in the tiny room on the landing. She was always so sweet and nice, saying little, listening to him rattle on about his life, and nodding her head. He was sure Isabel was in love with him. Sometimes it seemed so, anyhow. He was her first, her only lover. It made him feel good to hold her icy hand and kiss her pale cheeks.

When they spoke of death it was always in hushed tones, as if the subject was between the two of them alone—a sacred matter not to be shared with anyone, but each other.

"I want to use the upstairs bathroom," he said.

"I said *no* and meant it." Rachel caught Zack by the shoulder as he began his first step. "I need you down here with me now."

"Damn it, Mom," Zack said. But he felt unwilling to break away from her grip, though it would have been easy. She could be so foolish sometimes. If only he could talk to Isabel, he could probably find out who or what was threatening the house. Then again, maybe not. If Isabel had all the answers, she would've told him already. Still, she must be in a better position than anyone else to figure out what was happening on Burnt Chestnut, and why.

Zack and Rachel returned to the living room to watch Beatricia lay out another Celtic Cross, mumbling to herself. Otherwise, everyone was quiet. The men would surely return from the forest soon—they'd been gone an hour. Leo was dribbling his soccer ball around the house, and Wolfie, the dachshund, had long since taken to his cushion in the pantry, huddled beneath shelves stacked with jars of jams, pickles, and peaches, panting.

"There's something in this house," Beatricia announced,

looking at the cards spread before her.

“No shit,” muttered Zack.

“It’s upstairs,” said Beatrice, looking up at Rachel. Who, in turn, looked away. “There’s nothing upstairs, Mother,” said Rachel.

Zack had recently been reading a book on poker tells. Studying his mother’s too-passive face and tapping fingers, he decided she was lying. She must’ve heard the moaning from the master bathroom and seen the shadow of Old Mr. Nelson, leg amputated, bleeding in the bathtub. Zack had, more or less, ignored the image.

“We’re going upstairs,” said Beatrice. Taking the two canes in hand, she hoisted herself to her feet, pushed back the chair, and rounded up Crockett and Ruiz, who were finishing up their coffee in the dining room. Soon, she was leading a posse up the staircase, the two deputies smirking at each other, Rachel annoyed, and Leo and Zack trailing behind.

Rachel put two fingers on her neck. Zack knew she was counting her pulse. One of her sayings was, “If things go south in a crisis, take your own pulse first.”

“As a matter of record,” she said. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Really, Mom?” Zack said. “I do.”

Beatrice sank into the Victorian loveseat on the landing to catch her breath. Zack put a hand on the doorknob to Isabel’s room, then thought better of turning it.

“No ghost has ever been observed in a laboratory. Or dissected. Or measured. Or properly photographed,” said Rachel, using her lecturer’s voice. “Nor has ESP or any other psychic phenomena been proven by any qualified researcher.” She scanned the faces of everyone, then took a deep breath. “If ghosts were real they would, by definition, have to exist in a realm beyond natural law. Which means they would not be able to function in a universe in which natural law is operative.”

“That’s not really true,” said Zack, still holding the glass doorknob, which felt cold now.

“Let me finish,” she said, slumping, as if deflated, voice weakening. “The same holds true for other supernatural entities: demons, fairies, unicorns, vampires. All are fantasies developed by infantile cultures and should be dismissed with a minimum

of thought. Right?"

"No," said Beatricea.

"Mother, that you might find the location of a supernatural entity in my house is harder to believe than me flying."

"Well, dear," said Beatricea. "How do you know you can't fly? You haven't tried it yet."

Zack felt better to have everyone flocking upstairs to check the place out, rather than sitting downstairs, leaving the upstairs mysteriously hanging over them. If pipes were moaning now, they would be heard. If Mr. Ewell's misty image were still hanging in the shower, it would be seen. Still, he was not yet ready to have Isabel discovered, not against her will.

He and she had their secrets.

The group searched one room at a time, growing quieter in each—the bathrooms, the four smaller bedrooms, the master bedroom, the hallway.

"There's nothing here," Beatricea said at last.

Grandma didn't sense Isabel, Zack thought. Surprised, but relieved.

"Are you satisfied, now, Mother." Rachel tipped her head back and rolled her shoulders. Zack reached up and kneaded her neck, sensing her elation. As if, despite knowing better, the threat to her family had disappeared. Foolish again.

"No," said Beatricea, taking a step up the small stairway that led to the attic, "Not yet.

Somebody help me up here."

Deputy Crockett stepped up behind her. Putting his hands under her arms, he lifted her step after step until at last she was able to open the attic door and stand in the doorway.

"Not here, either." Beatricea scratched her head. Then, supported by the towering Crockett, she backed down the stairs hunched over the handrail.

Zack smiled to himself. On the way to the second floor, she'd passed the door to the little room without pausing. Which probably meant Isabel had heard them coming and had made herself scarce.

What can Grandma do about her, anyway—exorcism? Zack had heard about exorcising evil spirits, but never a good one. Still, it was better Beatricea had found none.

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Rachel hated the cold. It made her tired. Unfortunately, it was chilly on the landing.

Beatricia stopped in her tracks. "Something's here," she said.

Rachel sighed and looked away. The ridiculous euphoria she'd felt moments before gave way to a sense of her own absurdity. Her lips tightened to suppress a sob. Her mother was driving her bat-shit crazy.

"Something's here," said Beatricia, tapping the floor of the landing with the tips of her two canes. "In this spot."

The sudden smell of camphor wafted past Rachel. She broke her stumble by catching hold of Zack's shoulder.

He sucked in a quick breath.

Deputies Crockett and Ruiz looked at one another, Crockett frowned, Ruiz drew closed her premature smile.

Rachel wrung her hands in silent protest. Zack whispered, "Shit!"

Leo fought his way through the crowd to his grandmother's side, eyes huge with excitement.

Several minutes slipped by as Beatricia waved off the barrage of questions and protests assailing her. Leo clapped his hands. Rachel slumped down on the Victorian fainting couch as Zack slunk back upstairs to watch the flurry of activity from above.

"Rachel, bring my cards and planchette," said Beatricia. "All right, Mother," Rachel said wearily.

Rachel willed herself to her feet. "Ghosts," she muttered to herself. "Ridiculous."

Rachel counted the stairs as she descended and listened to her own footsteps as if they were falling like stones. A veil of unidentifiable odors, the sort you would find wafting from a forty-year-old time capsule freshly shaken loose from dirt lingered around her. A metallic aftertaste coated her tongue. Everything was wrong, altered somehow. The orange rug sprawling in the foyer blurred as she approached. The pierced tin pendant light overhead shimmered in what remained of the afternoon light. Dave's latest painting, the ox horn and the black fleece, shined, seemingly still wet. She was lightheaded. It was as though all the good air had been sucked from the house. Though she was still

trudging downstairs, the heavy footsteps faded to a patter, as if a bell jar had dropped from the ceiling to encase her.

Turning from the foyer into the living room, Rachel saw that the grand piano was no longer visible through the massive opening articulated by columns. She held her breath and stepped across the threshold. The piano was now tucked into the north corner of the room, and the grandfather clock was standing on top of it, chiming.



Dave and Lev led the way out of the darkened woods carrying the salesman's case between them by the handles on each end. Dave wondered if the little treasure trove would lead to anything. Perhaps. He felt foolish, like a character out of one of those paranormal thrillers Leo liked to watch because there was never any kissing. Dave's boots left tracks in the spongy, wet earth that seemed to be sucking his boots down, hesitant to let go. He glanced over his shoulder to assure himself that Wise and Creed were still close.

In the spitting rain, the sheriff resembled an Indian pachyderm trudging through the mire, and Creed, tiny and sneaky, the proverbial mouse. Wise's handgun was still in its holster. The rain-spotted rifle rested in the crook of Creed's arm. Just then, with teeth clenched, Creed whipped around as if he were being followed, as if he'd felt a ghost on his heels. Dave stumbled over a rut that stretched across the field of orchard grass like a trench dug by enemy soldiers. The dampness was making an old wound ache. In Desert Storm he'd commanded a platoon until a bullet had come whistling through his shoulder, earning him a Purple Heart. He wondered where it was. *Still in the safe behind the door in the water closet under the stairs?* He wanted to hold it. To feel the cool metal in his hand.

In the woods, rain dribbled on their heads from cuplike leaves. In the pasture west of Ewell's abandoned house, the large, cold drops fell hard—straight from the sky, stippling puddles and small ponds that stirred with hopping frogs. The men's shirts were soaked. Dave groaned.

Frogs. Again. It was almost dark, though only mid-afternoon, and the frogs were already beginning their nightly chorus. Clouds of mating gnats swarmed en masse like black ghosts, drifting between the men and the sun. Dave brushed flies from his face and remembered an oasis filled with dead men and mosquitoes in Iraq, near the Kuwaiti border, where blood swirled in the water. Maybe Lev had been right about the dead frogs in the red-stained pond. Maybe it was blood. *Maybe we are caught in a string of plagues.*

"Ridiculous," he mumbled.

"What?" said Lev.

"Nothing. Just spooked." Dave tripped again on a clump of grass. It seemed the earth was sending up green blades to attack him. "Wish I knew what was going on."

They marched stride for stride to keep the box level.

"There's an explanation." Lev rubbed the scar on his cheek with a thumb. "We just have to find it."

Dave scraped rain from his eyebrows and shoved back his sodden hair. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Lev muttered, plodding through the high, wet grass sown with darting midges. "Just trying to put two and two together." He stopped and glanced at Dave. "To make four."

"Come on, Sheriff," Creed called from behind.

"Damn this mess," shouted Wise, dragging his heavy legs to step over the maggot-ridden carcass of a decapitated deer. "I just shined these boots. Took a good forty-five minutes."

Lev stopped. "Let's put the box down for just a minute." He paused, then hooked Dave's arm. "Mr. Ewell was a first-born son. An only son." Rain rolled into the young man's eyes and he wiped it away. "Mr. Ewell fixed my BMX race bike every spring. He liked to talk about the time he raced in the Tour de France."

A ray of sun slipped through a tear in the heavy nimbus blanket and shimmered on the surface of a puddle.

"I know where you're going with this," said Dave, impatient,

waiting for Lev to say his piece so they could move on. “But it’s nonsense. Who knows if Mr. Petty was a first-born son? The Harper boys, maybe. But one was born before the other, twins or not. Besides, none of the victims was killed on Passover.”

Lev’s eyes widened. His fingers reached for the handle of the case.

Dave smiled. He was always amused when someone underestimated his intelligence. He’d gone to bed knowing that today was Passover and had pondered the fact all morning. He’d already tried to find a connection between the holiday and the murders and had long since noted that all the victims had been male. It’d almost been enough, but not quite. In the end, not even Beatricia’s séance or finding clippings about the Holocaust had been sufficient to persuade him. Dave’s left arm was tingling. He thought they should trade sides. As if reading his mind, Lev moved over to Dave’s position.

“Twins are twins,” said Lev, reaching for the handle. “That’s too fine a distinction.”

“Don’t mention your idea to the sheriff or Creed,” said Dave. He wondered if Lev was right.

“But we do know that someone who lived in that burned-down house decades ago assembled these papers.”

“I’m a first-born son,” said Lev.

“Me too.”

Creed fired a shot into the woods behind them.

“Holy Jesus. What’d you do that for?” hollered Wise from across the glebe.

“For the holy hell of it,” Creed said.

• • • •

The day was growing darker. Lightning lit up acres of green pasture as if the field were the surface of an enormous billiard table. Thunder echoed east and west like musket-fire closing in. The men hurried across Ewell’s lea of perfect orchard grass and Petty’s acres of land that had been allowed to lie fallow and become currcycombed by weeds and patches of dirt. The Sheltons’ newly painted barn loomed in sight. From across the horses’ paddocks came the sound of a tractor, motor roaring.

“What the hell,” said Dave, not wanting to take another step, but instead, he leaned into the rain. There was something unnatural about the light. The atmosphere had thickened to retard the movements of all who labored under it. Dave felt he was swimming, and if he stopped he’d have to tread water or sink. But if he went forward, he would enter a place where down might be up and forward might be back.

The barn and tractor were lit by a greenish glow that cascaded from the clouds and hung over the houses like an emerald umbrella. A tornado sky. But there were no swirling winds, only heavy rain that made little sound despite the deluge. Dave heard the throaty snarl of a tractor, then inhaled its diesel cough.

“Hey! There’s a body over there! By the barn!” Creed shouted, breaking into a run.

“I’ll carry the case,” said Lev. “Go!”

As if slapped awake, they ran toward what looked like a person stretched out behind the unmanned, idling tractor. By the time the sheriff came huffing to the spot, Creed was down on his knees. He had turned the body over and stretched it out in anatomical position, legs together, palms up.

Deputy Francois Leveaux was a bloody pulp.

“What’s he doing here? Sheriff, I thought you had the deputies all posted in the house,” said Creed.

“He must have come looking for us,” said Wise.

Leveaux’s groin and chest had been crushed. His head had burst, his face flattened from chin to forehead. Gray brain matter spilled into the mud like chipped beef.

“Sheriff Wise squatted to examine the body. “Someone ran over him with the tractor. Creed, you and Dave check the stable. Lev, take the box to the deputies, then check the house. If everything’s all right there, get your butts back here.”

Dave found himself close to weeping, kneeling. He wondered if Leveaux was a first-born son. Wet clay saturated the knees of his jeans as his fingers touched the crushed blue glass of Leveaux’s Santeria beads. Someone should climb on the tractor and turn it off.

‘Holy God damn it!’ Creed said angrily.

“Dave. Get up, go,” shouted the sheriff. “Forget the tractor,

Dave! Check out the barn!” Creed raced into the barn, his gun barrel ahead of him.

Dave followed through a bloody haze, not feeling the slippery stock of his rifle, his heart beats distant but terrifyingly distinct, like Indian drums echoing behind mountains.

“I’m going to kill something.” Dave thought. “I’m going to do it.”

Creed raced down the center aisle, then backtracked, stall-by-stall, each time poking his rifle over the Dutch doors before moving on to the next.

Dave stood and watched as Rhode Island reds clucked behind him, ruffling their feathers. The horses snorted in their stalls, dripping with spring rain and musky sweat and pressed toward the center aisle, as if they expected to be rubbed down with towels, or fed. They neighed and kicked at the walls: Magistrate, St. Francis, Queen Mary, Le Pouf and Slivovitz. Their brass nameplates were smeared with cinders. The horses were sneezing, noses running.

There was no one but the spy and Dave in the barn. There were worse people to be stuck with, but better places to be stuck. Creed swept some of the ash from the plate on Slivovitz’s stall and sniffed his finger. Creed’s coat was open. Dave reached inside, touched his sticky, wet shirt, and withdrew a bloody hand. Creed’s stitches had opened.

• • •

Dave pushed Leveaux’s mutilated body from his thoughts and ran into the house. His mind painted images of Rachel and his boys sprawled on the floor, blood soaking into the naps of rugs, seeping through wool into oak planks.

He cupped his hands and hollered. “Leo! Zack!” Coming from the backyard, Lev bolted into the kitchen, slamming the kitchen door shut behind him. His frantic elbow inadvertently sent the pots and pans on the stove hurling to the floor, where they bounced like living things.

“Where are the kids?” Dave shouted over his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” yelled Lev, scrambling for the pots, picking up and dropping them in his panic, kicking them into corners. “I was throwing up outside.”

“Jesus Christ,” shrieked Dave, unable to believe that Lev had taken the time to vomit before checking the house.

Cheeks burning, he left Lev and ran into the empty dining room and found it haunting him, mocking him. Damn this house! His eyes darted between the white columns that formed the gateway to the living room.

Rachel was sitting on a velvet Ottoman in the foyer, her unblinking eyes focused on something past the white columns, her finger pointing. Dave couldn't see what she was pointing at.

She's losing it, he thought.

“The kids are upstairs with Mom and the deputies,” she said, her finger still extended. Rachel's usual strategy in someone else's crisis was rational and calm, but this time she was staring and diaphoretic, her defense mechanisms having taken on a startling new shape. Dave wanted to shake her.

“On the piano,” she said, finally. She didn't yell, in spite of the metallic din that sounded as if all the pots and pans in the house were slam-dancing. He had to strain his ear to hear her. Rachel often whispered, a tactic she used to make him listen. Especially to things he didn't want to hear. It was maddening now.

Deputies Crockett and Ruiz charged down the creaking stairs, followed by Leo, then Beatrice, hobbling on her canes. Lastly, Zack, glassy-eyed, came floating down with a serene, shocked look, as if he'd seen the Holy Mother herself.

Dave rushed into the living room. In quick obedience to Rachel's pointing finger, he stood, opened-mouthed, sweating, the rest of the crowd behind him.

The grandfather clock towered over him, perched atop the piano. It chimed like something gone mad.

Zack's smile had disappeared. He stood, rigid as stone between the square columns, face blank.

The syncopated rhythm of Beatrice's canes clunked its way across the oak floor, then slowed. She struggled to stand, slumped, leaning heavily on the refectory table. Sheriff Wise slid a leather armchair beneath her to catch her fall.

Dave yanked open the clock's door. Gripping its pendulums, he stilled them, then felt as though he'd stuck his hand into a chest wall and stopped a heart.

“Mother of God,” said Deputy Ruiz, collapsing into a chair next to the old lady. Ruiz’s brown eyes were misting. She rolled up her sleeves exposing a boil, the size of a penny, heaped like an anthill.

Dave looked away. Signs of plague. He’d had enough. Boils, gnats, flies, water to blood, death of the first born. Frogs. He’d gotten it. Rejected it. Maybe too soon.

Crockett marched up to the clock and ran a finger down its face, coming away with ashes.

He held the finger to his nose. “Not just dust, but soot, too.”

“Fear is not the natural state of people,” mumbled Crockett, quoting the Dalai Lama.

Dave wished he had some spiritual hook from which to hang his troubles and transmute them. The Saint Christopher medal Rachel had given him before they’d gone on a medical mission to Haiti was nothing more than a good-luck charm, like Leveaux’s crushed Santeria beads he’d slipped into his pocket. He needed a real system, like a supernatural twelve-step program. What he really needed was a deity in his corner.

Rachel wailed and gasped for breath, cupping her wet face in her hands. Beatricia bit a knuckle. Leo looked at Zack and shrugged.

“Help me with the clock,” Dave said to Crockett.

They lowered it to the floor, sweating under its weight, foreheads beading with salty bubbles. Dave licked a corner of his mouth. The sweat tasted too much like tears.

“Everyone sit down,” said Beatricia. “Please.”

She leaned back like an empress and drummed her canes on the floor until Rachel ceased her sobbing and Deputy Ruiz said an uncharacteristic, “Fuck this bullshit.”

Dave looked over at Crockett, hoping for leadership.

Beatricia was too old; the sheriff too inclined to keep his own council; Creed too impulsive; Lev too shaken, both by the probable murder of Leveaux and the sudden intrusion of the supernatural.

Lucky Crockett. He seemed to have absorbed the Dalai Lama’s philosophy and the buffalo cultures of the plains Indians, which spoke reams for him. And he’d always been vocal about his experiences. He was a waterman by birth, and had taught

marksmanship to kids in 4-H, as well as to men on the force. Zack had always said Crockett was a badass medicine man. Dave knew that painting and horsemanship did not a badass make. After all, unlike himself, Crockett fed his family venison in the winter, ducks in the fall, and fish all summer. A superior man. But then, suddenly, as Dave studied him, understood him, Crockett looked more like a baby ready to sleep. The deputy had collapsed into a chair and had crossed his gangly legs. Dave watched his eyes move rapidly under their lids.

Deputy Ruiz, her hair more unruly than a deputy's should be and her lashes wet, moved to an armchair by the fireplace, which seemed to gobble her up, making her look like she was shrinking. Her skin was shiny and pale. She was falling apart.

What Dave wanted was someone to come up with a brilliant idea to make this spirit or beast or gang of aliens peacefully melt away. Or maybe just someone to keep watch while he concocted a fool-proof plan. And a calm wife, one whose soothing words would rid his heart of fear. But Rachel was in no kind of shape to comfort anyone, not even her children.

Everyone but Zack and Leo seemed in the grip of an ADD panic or catatonia. Or both. Out of breath, Dave put an arm around Rachel and led her to the couch.

"Two minutes of quiet." Beatrice sunk, closing her eyes, deeper into the wool-flocked chair. Its back was as tall as she was.

For the moment, at least, everyone was safe. Dave noticed his wet clothes were stuck to his skin, making a mess of the sofa cushion into which he had dropped. Leo got up from the piano bench, where Zack was rocking himself, his face composed with what passed for peace. Leo climbed into Rachel's lap. Her face was still moist, but she'd wrapped her arms around him and had stopped weeping. Dave leaned forward, hands on his muddy knees. After the séance and the incident with the clock, how in the world could he tell the women and children about the tractor?

He was responsible for Leveaux's death. For his own insistence that his family stay in Zebulon.

"There's been a death," he began.



A roll of thunder rattled the gray sky. The streetlights on Burnt Chestnut hadn't come on yet. Smoke drifted over rooftops and settled over the Sheltons' farm. Rachel could smell it, but not much else. She glanced up at the hole where the chandelier had been, wires spilling out like entrails, tied in a sloppy knot. Stepping back, she reached behind her to flick the switch for the pendant lights in the kitchen. Red, violet, and blue light fell out of each inverted Venetian torch and flowed into the dining room. She sat across from Sheriff Wise at the maple dining room table and fiddled with her wedding band, taking it off one hand and slipping it onto the other, then back again, noting on which finger it felt tighter.

"I want to report Deputy Leveaux's death to the authorities," she said, taking mental notes on how ruined the house felt, the plaster cracking in flakes from above, the skid marks on the hardwood floors, the wall-paint stained by finger prints.

"What authorities?" called Dave from the living room.

"I am the authorities, damn it!" said Wise, cocking his head. "Calm down and listen, Rachel. Crockett and Ruiz have put up the tape and the body's been covered by a tarp. When the rain lets up, we'll investigate the crime scene."

"You're taking this personally," said Rachel.

"That's because it's personal," said the sheriff, flattening his

boxy palms on the table.

“And what about the clock?”

“What about it,” said the sheriff.

“It didn’t move by itself. It’s too heavy for the kids.”

“So it is.”

“And everyone else was upstairs or outside.”

“That seems so.”

“That means that someone has been breaking in, don’t you think? Twice, that person has moved our rifles. He’s drunk my coffee and yanked a chandelier out of the ceiling. He’s also run over one of your deputies with a tractor and probably shot Mr. Creed in the woods.”

The sheriff was a smart man, but she felt like she was talking to a black hole. “And he’s killed your cat and set a wild horse loose on your farm?” said Wise.

“That’s what I think now.” Rachel looked into his clever, unblinking eyes, and felt the fluttering in her chest fading.

Rachel had met Phil while Andrea Wise lay dying in his arms from breast cancer in the hospice room at Shore General. She remembered it well, and was capable of tearing up about it even now.

Three weeks later, his kids had gotten busted running a crew of pot farmers and had fled to California where they were now employed by olive growers. Only a very few knew his backstory. It embarrassed him. Her too.

If only the man weren’t so incompetent.

“I know you didn’t kill my cat, Sheriff,” said Rachel. “I believe you’re an honest man.”

“Thanks for that, Dr. Shelton. But I don’t think there’s a person alive who could do all that mayhem without being seen.”

“So what are you suggesting, Sheriff?”

“I’m flummoxed, Doc. Don’t know what’s going on. But I’m like you, I guess. I’ve seen you work on cadavers, ma’am. You walk all around the body, you look at every inch of skin, get out your swabs, draw blood from the heart. Then, and only then, do you determine the cause of death and sign the papers, or order an autopsy. Isn’t that right?”

She sighed. “So you’re still looking at evidence?”

“Yes, ma’am. Now we’re thinking about the Holocaust.”

“Because of some old papers you found in that cellar?” Rachel sat chilled. A sooty breeze passed through the imperfect window frames of her old brick house.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what does that have to do with ghosts?” She fought the bitterness growing inside her. All this dithering was going to get them killed.

“I’m not excluding anything.”

“Sheriff, I think you grew up in the country with rednecks and yahoos, where superstitious people get ideas about events being...unnatural.”

“I take a lot of convincing, ma’am. Regardless of what you think.”

“I hope so, Sheriff,” Rachel said, telling herself Wise probably came from a long line of mountain people who handled snakes in church.

He rose from the table and pushed back his chair. “We should join the others.” Rachel didn’t want to.

In the living room, her mother was holding yet another séance to ask the spirits inhabiting the house to leave. She bit her lip to keep from shouting. Mommy’s mumbo jumbo was foolish. They were wasting time they didn’t have. Everyone should be looking for an intruder. She pushed against the edge of the table and an unlit candle fell out of its stick. She grabbed the beeswax taper, dug some black dust off its surface with a fingernail, then whipped it across the room where it struck a painting of a cow sulking in a feedlot. Wolfie whimpered as the candle soared by his ear. He scampered back to the pantry and curled himself on his royal purple velveteen pillow.

Rachel heard her mother’s voice droning.

“Spirits, if you don’t mean us well, I command you in the name of God to depart.” Beatricia paused as if she actually expected an answer.

Rachel stopped in front of a strip of masking tape Beatricia had undoubtedly ordered one of the deputies to lay across the threshold separating the two rooms, marking the boundary, her sacred domain.

“We’ve had enough of your bad behavior, spirits,” Beatricia said, her lids low, eyes rolled upwards. “Only if you are gentle,

do we invite your attention.”

Vanilla votives flickered in the darkening living room. The two deputies and Lev sat surrounded by oversized chenille goose-down-filled pillows on a sofa that seemed to be collapsing in the middle, forcing the three into an awkward snuggle. Zack and Leo hunkered cross-legged on the pumpkin-pie colored Turkish carpet. Dave and Creed weren't there. Rachel turned and saw their backs through the French doors to the side porch on the west wing. The men were sitting a few yards from the house, on walnut stumps, rifles steadied across their laps. Dave's head was tilted the same way he tilted it when he was studying a painting. Maybe he was listening to the rain morph from pouring to spitting. Or watching the twilight bats dart after gnats hiding in a garden usurped by the unseasonably tall knee-high mint.

Beatricia's tone lacked authority. Rachel knew her mother had practiced the bogus art of summoning spirits, but had no clue about exorcisms.

“Mom, if you're serious about cleaning out malevolent spirits, you should call a Catholic priest.” Rachel stood between the columns at the entry to the living room, refusing to cross into her mother's domain.

Beatricia's eyes focused on her daughter. “There's no Catholic priest within a hundred miles of Zebulun. Only Baptist and Methodist ministers and, oh, a Haitian priest thirty miles up Route 13. But they've all left.”

“I'm so sorry about that, Mother.”

Beatricia's silver hair had loosened from its French twist.

Rachel tried to ignore the strange arrangement of furniture and the new cracks in the plaster while glancing repeatedly at her two boys, who sat in half-lotus upon the pumpkin carpet.

She admired the way their olive complexions blended with the colors of the rug. Finally, she slapped her leg as if swatting a mosquito. When Zack and Leo looked up at her, she nodded toward their grandmother conspiratorially.

“I exorcise thee, every unclean spirit, in the name of God the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, our lord and judge.” Beatricia began reading from an Internet printout in one hand, magnifiers perched on the tip of her upturned nose. Her other hand held a bouquet of dried sage, which she raised and shook

with each utterance. “And in the power of the Holy Spirit, that thou depart from this creature of God, whom our Lord has designed to call unto his Holy temple. I cast out ye noxious vermin through the same Christ our Lord, who shall come to judge the living and the dead, and the world by fire.”

Beatricia stopped, wrinkled her nose, and sniffed the air.

Rachel smelled only the pervasive odor of burning firewood and the dampness that lingers after a storm.

“The room is cleansed,” said Beatricia, serenely. “No. Wait.” She squinted. “There’s a descending darkness. Deep as the Caspian Sea, impenetrable. Thick like mercury. I can’t see anyone’s face. But I can see you, dear.”

“Zack. Leo,” Rachel said, looking down at her children. “Get up and go to your rooms. Now. Go.”

“Your face is gone now, too, dear.”

Rachel wanted to turn back, but waited to hear the kids slam a door upstairs where they’d be safer, at least from the mind-bending experience of their own flesh-and-blood grandmother in yet another wacky trance.

It’d been a mistake to involve the boys in the séance. She went to the stairwell and heard their feet pounding up the steps to the large closet on the landing, and was glad of it. She’d rather have them in their rooms, but they’d be all right in the little room that had once been the vestibule of the maid’s back stair. It had a love seat, spare tack, and speakers. She smelled Shiva-brand frankincense floating down the stairwell. Zack called the closet his “study” and had decorated it with a celadon bowl of sand. In the middle sat a statue of Pan surrounded by little burnt-out incense sticks. End tables held geodes and a lava lamp. A Middle Eastern rug hung on the wall from the crown molding. Rachel ran back to the living room when she heard the door on the landing scrape across the sisal rug and the latch snap shut, indicating the boys were safe. From this. She returned to the living room to find her mother, even more slumped, pale as paste.

“Many spirits drawn to this house,” said Beatricia, hunched and clutching her chest. “There’s no light between them. Their weight is so heavy.”

She swayed and nearly fell out of the wingback chair. Her

hands drifted aimlessly through the space in front of her. “I can’t feel my fingers,” she said, grasping at the panic button she wore on a macramé cord around her neck.

“What’s wrong, Mother?”

“The spirits are pulling at my ankles,” she said. “That putrid smell, like moldy cheese.”

Rachel hopped over the masking tape and sniffed. Not cheese—more like old books.

The old woman gasped and coughed. The sheriff and Lev lowered her to the floor. Phil Wise began counting her pulse.

“Mother, please.”

Though standing upright Rachel was descending into darkness, too—as if in a night terror—and looking through the eyes of her mother. She heard shouts of alarm, but then saw that the arms reaching out for her were human arms, not the stinking arms of the dead or of imaginary spirits. The darkness slid away. Rachel saw a streak of light. Her vision cleared. She heard far-away voices, coming nearer. She opened her eyes and saw the faces of Lev and the deputies, glowing.

Her mother had begun drifting away from her physical body.

“Come back,” whispered Rachel.

• • •

When Beatrice fully awoke, Rachel was perched on the edge of the sofa with a cup of coffee. Wolfie had curled in a chair across from her, staring at her curiously, as if something big were on his mind. The boys were still upstairs.

Dave and Creed had come in from the side porch, drenched, and were sitting by the stove, which they had fed with wood until it was blazing. Both of the deputies and the sheriff stood by, quietly.

“Too many ghosts in here,” Beatrice murmured. “I can’t get rid of them.”

“Honestly, Mother.” Rachel sighed. “If you’re going to say things like that, please don’t say them around Leo and Zack.”

“The boys might know the ghosts,” said Beatrice, “At least Zack might.”

“I know you think you’re helping, but you’re not.”

Dave spoke up. “If Beatrice wants to believe in ghosts, let

her. For all we know, she's right."

"If something is in nature, it must obey natural law," said Rachel. "Ghosts do not obey natural law. Therefore, either they are not in nature or there is no natural law. Watch this."

Rachel picked up a King James Bible and held it above the floor. After waiting a moment, she let it fall with a thud.

"Ah," said Rachel, "There is natural law. No ghosts."

"What if there're laws of nature that we don't yet know," Bea said. "And what if ghosts obey them?"

"What if there are unicorns?" she snapped.

"Well, there are ghosts," said Creed. "Ghost Rider, the Holy Ghost, and the Ghost of a Chance."

"I'm tired," said the old woman, pulling on Rachel's arm.

Rachel helped her mother up the winding staircase and tucked her into the feather sleigh bed in the cantaloupe-colored guestroom. She kissed her forehead and watched her shallow, rapid breathing.

She poked her head into Zack's room. "You two, stay up here. It's safer."

"Of course it's safer. Isabel's protecting us," said Zack.

"I don't feel safe," said Leo.

She kissed them both on the tops of their heads then ran to the office to look up Holocaust survivors on the Internet. She gnawed a torn cuticle, tasting blood.

I'd better get myself a Valium, she thought.



In the living room, the sheriff rifled through the trunk from the cellar of the burned-down house and decided how to divvy up the evidence. The yellowed newspapers were spread out on the large refectory table in the living room. Lev and Creed took the photographs. Dave settled down in a rocking chair by the wood stove to let his clothes dry and study the tattered pages of a musty copy of *New York Magazine of the Arts*.

“So we’re going to look through this stuff and figure out who the killer is?” Deputy Ruiz nervously moistened an eyebrow with her pinky finger.

We’re going to try, the sheriff thought. Of the two remaining deputies, Crockett was the more reliable. Ruiz was plenty smart, but now she had a tremor. She was a bag of nerves.

“These papers are forty years old,” said Crockett, stretching out his legs. An unruly stack of documents threatened to topple in front of him. Pen in hand, he began taking notes, pressing hard, shaking the table.

“That’s right,” said Wise, thumbing through a handful of photos. “I figure the man who saved these papers did the killing, and the reason for the murders has something to do with the Holocaust.”

Dave looked up. “So now you’re going to tell us what you know?”

“When I’m sure of something I’ll tell ya’ all about it.”

“I thought a ghost did it.” Crockett paused, pen glued to paper. He looked over at the sheriff.

“Ghost or not,” Wise said, “I figure who we’re huntin’ for might’ve lost some kin in the Holocaust.”

“Quite a leap to serial killer.” Ruiz combed fingers through her wavy hair. One of her eyelids was twitching.

“Our only course of action. Long shot or not. Nothing else to do right now, but read and think.”

“So, I guess we’re looking for a Jewish man?” said Deputy Ruiz, squinting.

“Guess so,” said the sheriff, shrugging. “Or a gypsy. But yeah, Jewish is my guess.”

“Lev says tonight is Passover.” Crockett set aside a page from the stack.

“Guess everybody has put that together by now,” said the sheriff. “Maybe this killer imagines he’s the angel of death, taking vengeance.”

“Scary thought.” Ruiz gave the sheriff a phony smile and fingered her cross. “Some person with black, bloody wings visiting houses at night, killing people.”

“It doesn’t quite work out, though,” said Wise, frowning. “Wasn’t Passover when the murders occurred.”

“Maybe he was just practicing, or confused.” Ruiz gave a forced laugh.

She looked about ready to crack. She might have hit on the truth, though. The remark seemed less joke than revelation. Inconsistencies didn’t always matter much.

When lightning lit the darkening sky, Sheriff Wise rose from the table. He moved to the back window overlooking the north pasture. Clouds black as oil slicks rumbled over the tree line. Between peals of thunder he heard whirring from the office on the second floor. He imagined Rachel downloading and printing something useful. But it brought him no comfort.

The rain that had been coming in fits and starts all day now was thrashing in swirls against the window like phantoms. *I am the voice of the earth*, said the voice of the rain, thought the sheriff. The line from Walt Whitman was the only poetry he remembered. The trees in the distance appeared and

disappeared. Drowned, like reeds in a vertical sea.

The sheriff noticed something odd about the tarp. It had been laid over Deputy Leveaux's body, weighted down at the corners by cinder blocks. But each time the wind gusted, an edge lifted and waved, like a blue hand.

"Deputy Ruiz," Wise said, figuring it would be good to give her something else to do. "Something's the matter with that tarp. Mind getting your rain slick on, to check it out?"

"Okay," said Ruiz, chewing a lip. "It's getting warm in here."

"I'll go with ya'," said Wise.

Dave got up from the captain's chair at the table to come study the view beside the sheriff, touching a finger to the steaming window.

"If you want me to check the horses, I will," said Lev.

"It's your job," said Dave. "Don't ask." Then he blanched. "I'm sorry, Lev. I didn't mean it like that."

Lev shrugged. "No problem."

Deputy Ruiz, Sheriff Wise, and Lev slipped on their rain slickers and walked out, each carrying a flashlight against the falling dark. Lev dodged puddles and the mess of tiny frogs that was erupting in the shallow water, slapping at gnats. He stepped up into the barn. Wise and Ruiz turned and walked over to the tarp, stopped, and stood transfixed.

Aside from its waving corner, the tarp was lying flat in the rain. Leveaux's body was obviously gone.

Ruiz spun around to the sheriff as if she were trying to speak, but couldn't.

"Calm down," said the sheriff, drawing his revolver in spite of his quick intuition there'd be nothing to shoot. "Lev, come out here," he shouted, loud enough to be heard in the barn.

"Jesus Christ," blubbered Ruiz, lowering herself into a shooter's crouch. She dropped her weapon into the tall, soaked grass, then scrambled to retrieve it.

Lev came running out of the barn, his flashlight cutting a path through the downpour. "Leveaux's gone."

Wise pointed at the tarp with his pistol. Lev took one look and used his flashlight's beam to scan invisible targets in the north pasture; then, slipping in panic, he let the beam rise to the threatening sky.

It had been a mistake to bring Lev, maybe Ruiz too. “Both of you, go inside,” shouted Wise.

Lev and Ruiz pivoted and ran for the house as if a phalanx of ghosts were chasing behind them.

Sheriff Wise stood outside. He squatted and lifted the tarp, looking for clues. Where’d he go? There was nothing under the tarp but orchard grass. He rose and moved deliberately toward the house. He took his time, furiously thinking.

In the kitchen, Wise warmed his spread fingers over the Viking range. Little streams of cold meandered around the room, curling about the furniture and licking at the cabinets. He shuddered. He would have to search the pasture, and maybe the woods behind it that were disappearing into shadow. He waited for Crockett and Creed to put on their rainwear, their fingers fumbling. He would have to use Ruiz again, but was sorry for it. Maybe she needed another chance, wanted or not. She stayed hunched, in her rain gear, doomed to go out again.

“Hands ache,” said Wise. “Barometric pressure’s takin’ a nose dive.”

“It’s been a long day, Sheriff,” said Crockett. “Mine aren’t cooperating either.”

“Lev, you stay here with the Sheltons,” the sheriff said.

“All right.” Lev unsnapped his rain slick.

“You ready, Creed?” said the sheriff.

“Ready.”

“Let’s go.”

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The wind was a touch lighter now and the thunder calmed, but from the north a storm was approaching. A gray front of rain-cooled air formed a flat shelf cloud, plowing under the warmer moist air. In a short time the sky would be black and the space between the cloud and the earth would be filled with water, as if it were poured from a hidden big dipper, now tipping in darkness.

Water streaming from his face, Wise stood frozen, Creed and the deputies beside him. The tarp’s loose corner was beating in the wind violently, pounding at the earth in frustration, Leveaux still gone.

Wise roared, over the tumult of wind and rain. "Oddest thing is, three of the corners are still in place."

Creed nodded, cocking his rifle.

"Guess he couldn't'a crawled outta that one corner," shouted the Sheriff.

"Nobody could'a pulled him out, either," said Ruiz, gazing at the sheriff like a child looking to her daddy for answers.

Creed snorted. "I'll tell you what we have left," he said, barely making himself heard. "Somebody uncovered the body and then hauled it away for some reason. Then came back to flatten the tarp for no reason. After which he put cinderblocks on three of the corners, but not the fourth, for no reason."

"You think so, do you?" said the sheriff.

"No, I don't."

Wise walked around the flapping blue sheet, focusing his Surefire C2 on the muddy ground. Creed and Ruiz pulled out their flashlights, Ruiz following in the sheriff's path, Creed walking a circle outside of it.

"It's impossible to find evidence in these conditions," said Ruiz.

"Got something here," shouted Creed, focusing his beam on a small area devoid of grass.

The deputy and the sheriff joined him. Two footprints were plainly visible in the mud. "Leveaux's," said Crockett.

"Not unless he can walk around with his head burst open and his face smashed flat," said the sheriff.

"Maybe he took the tractor," Creed said, dryly.

The tractor was gone. The sheriff and Deputy Crockett looked around, the beams of their flashlights crossing and re-crossing lines of rain.

Creed stomped northward, his flickering light straight ahead, as if he already knew where he was going. "There're some tire tracks back there headed in this direction," Creed called over a shoulder.

The sheriff muttered, "Deputy Crockett, post yourself here at the tarp."

Creed was just the sort of man to walk off by himself when coordinated action was called for. The sort of man who'd get himself shot or axed, leaving others responsible, feeling guilty.

Wise hulked forward, spitting out rain. Deputy Ruiz tagged after, as timid as Creed was heedless. Creed seemed to surge with a joy that drove his legs forward, speeding them up as if they were afraid of being caught.

Ribbons of lightning jagged down stepladders of sky and lit the tree line to the north. Thunder followed in a string of booms as lightning struck again. Wise saw the tractor roll into a stand of scrub bush and Scotch pine at the edge of the woods and disappear.

Creed took off rabbit-fast. Deputy Ruiz moved ahead of Wise, looking back, as if hoping to be told to stop, and then loped after Creed when the sheriff waved her forward. Wise walked, flashlight in one hand, rifle in the other. He'd never shot a man during his entire career as sheriff. Maybe the time had come. If, in fact, whatever was driving the tractor could be shot—if the thing at the wheel was a man.

The trees lost substance in the driving rain beneath a tornado sky. The weight of his legs was crippling as he struggled to lift them, the suck of the mud felt as if it were quicksand. By the time he reached the farm road that bordered the woods, Creed was already thrashing about in the undergrowth, a half-seen shadow. Deputy Ruiz had found a slippery ditch to lie in, rifle extended, as if she thought some doughboy of World War I had come to haunt them.

“Where’s the tractor?” Wise snapped.

“Creed will find it,” said Ruiz. The storm exploded, the field lit by overlapping flashes of lightning.

“Why are you in that damned ditch?”

“The tractor can’t go far in those woods,” said Ruiz. “Pretty soon, the guy who’s driving it might come this way.”

“My Aunt Bessie’s fanny, he will.”

“There’s a chance.”

“Get out of the ditch,” shouted Wise.

Ruiz stood, covered with mud. The sheriff looked back toward the swaying pines. There was no opening large enough for a tractor to pass through. Maybe they were in the wrong spot. He walked fifty paces east, a hundred paces west, then walked back to Ruiz, who was weeping with fear, her face distorted, her lips either struggling to stay in place, or say something.

“There’s no space for a tractor to go through,” said Wise, looking away. He sucked in a deep, wet breath and hollered, “Creed! Hey Creed! Creed! Can you hear me?”

The day darkened further, as if the sun had gone out or the earth had turned too rapidly. The downpour increased its fury. *The gods have turned on all their spigots*, the sheriff thought. Trying to kill us all.

“Creeeed!” he yelled.

“What?” came an answer, punctuated by a round of thunder.

The sheriff’s flashlight caught Creed emerging from the woods twenty feet away.

“Thank you, Jesus,” the sheriff muttered, but then, from deep in a thicket, came the sound of an engine starting up. Wise and the two deputies turned toward the chug and roar.

Wise was shivering. The frozen air started at his feet, spread to his knees, raced to his waist, and rose to his chest and face like ice erupting. A crash overhead drew his eyes upward to the sky, where a vertical cloud towered over the field like a tipping anvil. He backed up a step, heart chilled but still jack hammering against his ribs. Never in his life had he been so afraid. His mind seemed to float out of his body and then hover above him, looking down, detached, curious about the mechanics of fear.

As for Ruiz, he was certain she was pissing herself. But what about Creed? His smile was gone, but the little man wasn’t shaking. He was standing, one foot ahead of the other, rifle shouldered and pointed at the woods, lining up his sights.

The sound of the tractor engine thrashed the thick evergreen wall. “How the hell did it cross over the ditch?”

“Is there room for a tractor to run in these woods?” said the sheriff.

“None at all,” said Creed.

“We’d better bolt,” said Ruiz.

“No point,” said Creed. “That thing will catch us.”

The threesome broke for the ditch and dove.

“Might as well try a shot,” said Creed, poking out the barrel of his Winchester.

The storm uttered a deep cry, one moment the roar of a waterfall spilling over rocks, the next moment the shrieking of a train accelerating over clacking tracks.

“Duck,” yelled Creed. Covering their heads with interlaced fingers, they flattened themselves at the bottom of the ditch where the water was inches deep and getting deeper. The monstrous bellowing continued. Amputated branches flew overhead, hurling leaves.

Then it was gone. The only sound remaining was the pounding of rain, filling up the trough in which they wallowed.

“A tornado. A little one,” said Ruiz, pale faced and shaking, rising to her knees.

“I doubt that,” said Creed.

“If it was a tornado,” said the sheriff. “It was driving a tractor.”



Back at the house, the deputies, the sheriff, and Creed took hasty showers. Zack sat silent on the landing, listening, thinking. The sheriff put on Dave's old clothes, unable to button the pants, but concealing the breech with an untucked shirt. Creed and Ruiz wore Zack's T-shirts and jeans. Zack smiled, a little. By the time they all got downstairs, everyone but Beatrice was settled in the living room speaking in hushed tones. Beatrice was still sleeping in the guest room upstairs, no one thinking to wake her, except Zack, who had decided not to. He had had his reasons.

"I'm not going to put up with this," said Rachel, suddenly. "Blaming ghosts. We're adults."

"Well what could it be?" whispered Aniceli Ruiz, lifting her cross to kiss it. She had her hair up, still wet. No makeup on. Zack thought she looked ten times more beautiful without it. But her eyes were red, her voice a whisper.

"Could have been a tornado," Creed said. "But a tornado that could sniff you out?"

"That's not funny, George," Rachel said, handing him her cell phone.

He called up his wife and told her to get the hell out of Sykesville, just north of Zebulon, to drive to Parksley and stay overnight at her mother's house. "Right now, Liz," he said. "I love you, Babe. See you tomorrow. Promise."

“We don’t know what it was,” said the sheriff. “Maybe it was a tornado with a GPS.”

Zack appreciated the joke and chuckled. No one else did.

Still, he was growing anxious about his safety, the safety of his whole family, and Lev’s. And what about Isabel? Since she’d first come to him, Isabel had never left the house or hurt anything, animal or human. Why hadn’t she told him about Deputy Leveaux or the tractor? On the landing, he’d called to her twice since noon, but she hadn’t talked to him or come out of the closet since morning.

Perhaps she was angry with them all for staying in Zebulon. But where could they have gone? Zack felt his stomach burn. He broke out in a sweat. Wolfie was shivering too, rubbing against his leg. He’d counted on Isabel to protect his family from the neighborhood killers. But where had she gone?

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Coming down the stairs, Rachel thought she could hear the faint croaking of frogs through the oculus above the entry door. She refused to speculate further about the mutilation of Deputy Leveaux or the incident with the tractor.

The guys had hauled all the materials from the burnt-out cellar to the refectory table by the front windows and were now turning pages in frantic study. The sheriff settled into an overstuffed chair, flipped open his notebook and clicked his pen. Having mixed a martini, George Creed sauntered into the living room, hoisting the glass to his lips. He looked over Dave’s shoulder at photographs of Yad Vashem, the memory wall in Israel for victims of the Holocaust.

“You’re not going to be any good to us drunk, George,” said Rachel.

“Can’t hurt.” George slurped up an olive from the glass.

She turned the corner at the foot of the stairs and headed for the kitchen, Leo trailing behind her. Her Internet research on the Holocaust had been a waste of energy—nothing applicable to the present situation had leaped out at her. Now she’d have to waste even more effort throwing some food together. The boys were unmanageable when hungry. The darkness outside the kitchen window was no longer caused just by rain and the

black clouds thrusting themselves between the earth and the sun. Night was upon them.

All day she had been watching the clock, as well as the sky. Now, the two were in strict accord. She almost cried out, her strong hands fisting.

She pulled the curtains of the windows in the kitchen tightly shut, in case some killer was creeping around outside. She imagined arrows from a crossbow, perhaps, breaking through the glass, impaling her and Leo as he worked beside her.

She cracked a clove of garlic, broke lettuce into a bowl, threw oil in a skillet. She washed tomatoes and cucumbers then began to slice them beside the sink.

She was tired of being a doctor, horse trainer, and her husband's secretary for his Internet businesses. She was sick of taking care of the house and everyone in it. She'd rather do something creative, like become a set designer or movie makeup artist. Big magical stuff involving prosthetics. Maybe she could become a writer. She was full of words and wrote in a journal every morning. She'd even managed to squeeze out a few short stories in the dank overnight physician's quarters during night shifts at the hospital. Dreaming up scenarios involving imaginary people and worlds was pure freedom. She achieved transport easily and instantly. Words tumbled from her brain almost unbidden. Details poured out of her like ink spreading on white vellum. Sentences scrambled down the page, so fast it felt she'd have to catch up, haul them in, and contain them. The difficulty, for her, wasn't starting—it was stopping. Yes. She was suffering from end-stage physician burn-out.

Being killed would certainly stop her. She choked at the thought. There was no mundane interruption of her life that she did not resent when it intruded on any of her passions. How much more would she resent an arrow through the window?

Or a murderous ghost?

Again, she was angry. Sick to her stomach and angry. If a ghost spoke to her right now through the pipes of her sink, she would rip the pipes out with her bare hands and pull the intruder into the light of the kitchen, screaming. Then tear it, or him, apart as easily as she had the lettuce in the bowl.

Leo backed up against the refrigerator to watch her. She

realized she was handling the knife like a mad woman, cutting the carrots with a butcher's stroke, mumbling to herself.

"Do you need any help?" Dave said. He stood at the doorway, his voice soft and tentative. Wolfie fled to his pillow in the pantry.

"Dave," she said, "There are no ghosts in this house."

"I didn't say there were. Someone just stole the tractor, and the noise was loud as a tornado."

"I am resigning as your secretary," she said.

"Okay," he said, voice almost a whisper.

"So don't ask me to help with your businesses, ever again, please."

"Okay. Maybe Lev can help out."

"And don't ask me to cook. We can hire someone."

"Alright."

"It's not that I won't help you once in a while, or never cook. I love doing it. It's just I can't be the one always expected to do it. I'm a doctor, for God's sakes."

He smiled, shrugged. "Okay with me."

"Well, I'll be cutting back on my hours at the hospital, too," she said, "and only riding one horse a day, no more."

"That's fine, too."

"I'm going to be a writer. I need time to do it," said Rachel. She picked up a knife and began to slice. "You have your mandolin lessons and painting lessons. So I'm going to have my writing time, uninterrupted."

"Okay," he said. "Don't pretend I'm not agreeing with you."

She was quiet for a moment, thinking, biting her lip. "I finished that noire detective story, you know. No spare time, and I did it anyway."

"I know, honey. You can be anything you want to be. You've proven that."

"And I gave that story a great title: 'Big, Blond, Beautiful, and Dead.'"

"Being angry is better than being afraid," Dave said. "But don't turn it on me."

"You're not my psychiatrist."

"Don't get hysterical," said Dave.

"You chose this house," Rachel said.

"We both chose it."

She bowed her head, and began chopping again. There was no answering back to the truth.

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Zack barreled through the kitchen door. Dave stepped aside, never lifting his gaze off Rachel. If she got any worse, he would insist she take a Valium and lie down upstairs, out of sight of the others. But what if her old night terrors came back? What then?

"I'm going to have a Coke," said Zack, going to the refrigerator and putting his hands on his brother's shoulders to move him aside.

"There's one left, and it's mine," said Leo.

Paying no attention, Zack opened the door and took out a can. "I said it's mine." Leo scowled.

"That's Leo's," said Dave. "He bought it with his own money."

Zack, Coke in hand, paused, glaring at Dave. "He can have it." Zack slammed it back into the refrigerator rack.

Dave felt a flash of anger, but knew it was born of his frustration with Rachel. He tried to push it down, struggling with it. He was a Gemini, and thought like one—something he regarded as nonsense—but there it was again and again. Easygoing and thoughtful, quick to serve others and empathetic, despite a sometimes lordly indifference, yet he recoiled at the slightest hint of injustice. There was Zack, a son he was raising as his own, showing a dismal attitude in the kitchen Dave had upgraded and decorated with painted bumblebees.

"I hope you're happy now," said Zack. "Leo gets his precious Coke."

"Just leave the kitchen," said Dave, keeping his voice low and even. "Go to your room."

"He doesn't have to go anywhere," said Rachel, turning from the sink, eyes narrowing. "He's my beautiful boy and you're not going to touch him."

"Go ahead, Zack," interrupted Leo. "You can have it."

"Let's share it," said Zack, punching his brother in the shoulder. Leo returned the punch and laughed. Zack hugged his mother and looked down at his shoes as he passed Dave on the way out. "Come on. Let's go drink it on the landing. I've got something cool to show you upstairs."

“Get your mother a chair from the dining room first, Leo.”

He disappeared into the dining room then brought back a chair that he placed in front of the butcher block, in the middle of the kitchen. Rachel kissed Leo’s cheek and plopped into it. She cut up a beet.

“Where’d that come from?” said Dave in hushed tones. “I’ve never lifted a hand to Zack, or to anyone else. You know it.”

“But you’ve wanted to,” said Rachel.

“No,” said Dave, “I’ve never wanted to.”

“Fine. Whatever,” she pointed a kitchen knife at him as though it were a wagging finger. “Leave me alone. Why don’t you go do something useful like figure out who’s trying to kill us?”

“You’re starting to panic.”

“No, I’m not.”

“The truth is,” said Dave. “You’ve been a bundle of nerves since your horse died last year.”

“What do you expect? Aristino was shot. That could’ve been one of the boys.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I loved that horse. He trusted me. I could ride him in the moonlight after work, with airplanes flying overhead. I could take him horse packing in the mountains, or to swim in the sea. I could have put a blindfold on him and he would still have done anything I asked. I had him for twenty years. I’ll never find another one like him.”

“You think it’s your fault, don’t you?”

Tears slid down her cheeks. “Isn’t everything?” She wiped her face with the bottom of her apron. “Go on, leave me alone.”

“All right,” said Dave. “But try to calm down. We’re figuring this thing out. Nothing that bad is going to happen tonight.”

“It’s already happening.” She put down the big knife, got up and took a peeler out, slamming the drawer shut with her hip. “One deputy already run over.”

Dave grimaced. He didn’t know what to say to that. He groped for something comforting to tell her that would go to her heart like roses on Valentine’s Day. Nothing came. She was past consoling. Something twisted inside him. Anger bubbled up and he tried to swallow it. The taste was bitter and sour all at once, like an under-ripe persimmon.

“I’m gonna go help the sheriff.” He turned away from his wife and left.

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Rachel was alone. Finally. She peeled a beet, standing directly over a trashcan pulled out of its cabinet. It was difficult to remove the red skin without cutting into the flesh.

Her hand slipped and she scraped a cuticle from the thumb gripping the beet. “Damn it!” She pitched the peeler and the root overhand. Garnet-red beet juice splattered onto the pine floor and the quartzite counter as they flew across the kitchen. They landed in the stainless steel sink with a clank. The beading juice on metal reminded her of an autopsy table. Or an embalming table. She pulled a fresh blade out of the knife-block and tried to slice neat rings that reminded her of orderly rows of vegetables at a salad bar after church. Her hand slipped again and she cut her finger. *Shed blood*, she thought, putting the cut in her mouth and sucking. She closed her eyes for a moment, inhaling through her nose, trying to think of the golden red leaves of fall, the snow-hung boughs of winter. Of how Aristino’s coppery coat would pick up spots of light from the quiet waters of the bay in summer. Of a happier time. Of anything, but spring. She put her head down on a folded arm. Soon she slept, sitting, drooping over her butcher block.



Dave worried about there not being enough light. The vanished sun had dragged the daylight away and the storm had blotted out the stars. Having donned his battle fatigues, Leo had raced through every room, turning on the lights. Dave trailed him, also flipping switches. There would never be enough light.

Dave joined the four other men at the refectory table in the living room, the materials from the moldy cellar in loose stacks before them. Lev held a photo up to a hundred watt bulb, lips tight, his cheek scar puckering. Holding the picture flat in his open palms like a Rabbi offering a page of Holy Scripture, he passed it to Dave, whose stomach turned. Each man presented it to the next, in silence, as if it were an icon. The five sat still as statuary, expressions of mourning carved onto their faces, studying the materials.

Dave's mind was at odds with his feelings as he examined each image. A naked girl sprawled in deep mud as if raped to death. Emaciated corpses slung into pits by men in raincoats. Mounds of the dead bulldozed into trenches. A young woman with a bullet hole in the middle of her forehead, eyes wide and staring. Thin men lined up in front of a firing squad, shoulders slumped and heads down.

Only the sound of brittle paper changing hands broke

the silence at the table. Finally, Wise stood and collected the pictures in a large manila envelope, then returned it to the center stack. He leaned between Dave and Lev and picked up the pile of newspaper and magazine articles, handling yellowed, inspissated sheets like a collection of ancient pressed flowers, as if at any moment they would splinter to dust and blow away. He passed a clipping to each man.

"Looks like all these are written by a guy named Nuno Sievers," said Creed. He shook his head. "Never heard of him." He looked toward the sheriff. "You?"

"Seems sorta familiar." Wise shrugged, forehead creasing. "Maybe way back somewhere.

From before I was sheriff."

"I've got something here," said Dave, tapping his article gently. "In the *New Yorker*." He set each of the five pages carefully down on the table, in order. "Same guy. Nuno Sievers."

"What's the gist?" said the sheriff, looking over the cliff formed by the nearly touching shoulders of Dave and Lev.

Dave inhaled decades of old must that hung like a cloud over their workspace. "A piece about the slaughter of the Sievers family at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1942." He raked a hand through his hair. "The author calls it *Memoir of Belsen: Forget You Not*. As a child, Nuno Sievers was freed by the British in 1945. Both of his parents and two brothers had been hung two days before and he'd been made to watch. Then he was forced to hand over surgical instruments as his brothers were autopsied by Nazi doctors. Listen to this."

Dave read, voice shaking.

Every day we got weaker. Our gums bled and sores formed over our protuberant bones from sleeping shelved on thin pallets, stacked from clay floor to ceiling and infested by fleas. We were dizzy all day, hallucinating, and could do no more work. Not even drag ourselves from our bunks to drink at the water trough. My family had been physicians for generations, since the Middle Ages when they settled Jerez and built the most famous hospital on the Iberian Peninsula. So the new order of Germans required our assistance in human experimentation—on ourselves—and then forced my parents and brothers to dissect our fellow prisoners and organize data. After that the

Nazi doctors executed all my immediate family except me and my cousin Sylvie. They made us watch and then clean up the blood. I was eight years old.

On the final day, when I thought I had nothing left, no will, no desire, no strength to keep breathing, I decided to lie down and say goodbye to life. Sylvie, only seven years old, came to me in my cocoon of rags and said, "Get up! There's something funny going on out there. Something good. People are running all over the place." I told her she must be crazy. "Just lie down and die in peace." But she pulled at my hand and said, "No, come look. There's a man in a tank speaking English on a loudspeaker. The gates are all open."

"Thanks, Dave." said the sheriff. "I'll look through the rest of this. Go get on your computer and Google the guy—Nuno Sievers."

"I'll be right back." Dave rose and rolled up his sleeves, then was startled as a series of knocks came from beneath the middle of the table: dot dot dot space dot dash dot dot space dot dash space dash.

The other men jumped up out of their chairs.

"All right," said Dave, rolling his eyes. "You can come out now."

A pair of jump boots wiggled out from under the table, followed by two legs in combat fatigues and then a compact body dressed in camouflage right up to a duck-billed cap. The whole thing, connected to a squeaky voice and weighing maybe ninety pounds.

"Looks like you guys have seen a ghost," said Leo, his canteen slamming Creed's knee as he squirmed out and leapt to his feet. "What can I do you for?"

Dave paused to wipe cold sweat from his forehead onto his shirt. He leaned over to gaze at Leo at eye level. "Listen carefully, son. Go upstairs. Find your tarp, not the tent with the hardware. The canvas one. The one that matches this gear. Spread it out, then fold it up nice and tight and neat. Put it in the bottom of your backpack. We might need to use it later on."

"Roger that, Dad," said Leo, slipping out of the living room and marching up the stairs.

Dave followed the little soldier halfway up the stairwell

and paused. The sound of Zack mumbling love poetry that he'd written himself flowed down the cold stairs like a waterfall of rhyming couplets.

*My love for you like secret sin/ Lives for me to languish in/
At night I laugh, by day I cry/ I ask the gods to tell me why/
The surest joy, the wildest woe,/ Can never end. Where
shall we go?*

Dave waited until the poem was over. When he'd been an adolescent he had written old-fashioned romantic poems and recited them to empty air for practice before unleashing his love on his first girlfriend, Emily. Curious. He was not Zack's biological father, but the boy seemed to take after him. Zack had the heart of an artist. Dave smiled as he passed the boy sitting on one side of the sofa, looking up as if he'd been caught with a girl. His palm was turned up and resting on his knee as if he'd been holding hands with someone. Zack smelled like fresh aftershave, something Italian, maybe Bulgari. Something Rachel must have bought the last time she went to New York and visited Sachs.



Sheriff Wise got up from his chair without saying a word. At the window his digital recorder was still pointed toward the north pasture. It was possible the camera's eye had been wide enough to capture images from the patch of ground near the barn where the tarp had covered Deputy Leveaux. But the sheriff was less than hopeful. As he remembered it, only the back forty were in the viewfinder when he'd pushed the *record* button.

"One of you men plug the cable into the TV," he said.

The sheriff moved the tripod, replayed the recording only briefly, and turned on the screen. They all stood and watched. From upstairs came the hum and clicking of Dave's printer.

The picture was clear enough. In spite of the darkness of the image, Wise could make out the flat tarp at the edge of the screen.

"Run it back further." Creed hollered like a drill sergeant. He drained his martini glass and put it down on an end table.

"Guess I could," said the sheriff.

He hit the play button, again. This time the tarp covering the body looked more like a blue shroud.

"Real smart to think of this, Sheriff," said Dave.

"Look here," said Wise, mostly to himself. He felt chilled, as if a window had been left open and he'd been attacked by cold air.

Only Creed managed a laugh. But Wise didn't believe Creed's smugness. He figured the man had gotten himself deep as quicksand and was covering up his fear. And fear was the enemy, a nameless, unreasoning, justified terror that can paralyze the best minds in circumstances not nearly as bad as this. No. The first duty of man is to conquer fear, with that Wise agreed.

He studied the faces of his crew and drew in a breath. Their faces seemed expectant, foreheads beaded with sweat. In only seconds, they would know what had happened to Deputy Leveaux's body. After that, they could rewind further and find out how the deputy was killed by the tractor.

The sheriff played the recording forward in slow motion. One moment, the body was there. The next, it wasn't.

"Hot damn," said the sheriff, his voice drowning out the shouts of the others.

Creed stopped laughing. He took a step toward the camera, only to be pushed back by Wise. Lev moved closer to the screen. Crockett, holding his book, backed up a step. Deputy Ruiz's elbow knocked the martini glass off the end table and she scrambled to pick it up, smashing the olive under one sole by accident.

The sheriff reversed the footage, then replayed it. Same result. The tarp had a body under it. Then it didn't.

"There's a problem with the camera," Crockett said.

"I doubt it." The sheriff hit the reverse button again. "Let's try to find Leveaux alive and the tractor in the same frame."

Sheriff Wise pressed PAUSE, then replayed the last quarter of the recording on high speed until the image of him and the men finding Leveaux's body came into view. His jaw tensed as he stopped and rewound until an image appeared of Leveaux leaning on the barn, holding his rifle.

Wise fast-forwarded and then let it run. Suddenly, without having fallen, Leveaux was lying on the ground, immobile, dead. The sheriff replayed it at low speed. Same result. Leveaux standing, Leveaux fallen. No in-between, no tractor.

"Someone's playing games with us," Crockett said.

Lev collapsed in the nearest chair, looking stunned. Creed ran to a window and looked out, rifle cradled in his arms like a baby.

The sheriff hit PLAY again and the digital recorder hummed. He walked to the window, abandoning the camera. Nothing but dark sky and rain hurling itself against the glass.

“Hey. What’s that?” said Creed.

Dave returned from upstairs with a printout in his hands.

Creed and the sheriff stood transfixed, Crockett paled, and Lev rose to his feet, shaking.

On the flat screen TV, the black hoof of a buried horse was just breaking through the earth.

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“Rachel cannot see this recording,” Dave said. “Turn it off.”

The sheriff packed the up tripod and camera and put them on a chair beside the bookcase looming over the baby grand.

“Brrr,” said Dave. “It’s freezing in here.” He crouched in front of the stove and lit a teepee of kindling, then rolled a bundle of sawn locust branches onto the grate.

The rain stopped its incessant beating and the storm clouds, blowing by, let a glimmer of moonlight slip through the window.

An overstuffed chair groaned as the sheriff lowered himself into it. “Anyone here still think we’re not up against something unnatural?” he said.

No one spoke. The fire crackled. The wall above the woodstove thumped as if a bat were trapped in the flue.

“Good,” said the sheriff. “Because we are.”

“It’s also lethal,” said Dave.

Creed laughed, then stifled himself as if finally becoming aware no one else thought anything happening was funny. But Wise knew better. Creed was scared. He must be scared. But his face was open as ever, his posture relaxed.

Johnny Crockett rose from the piano stool and walked to the window. He bit his lip and put a fist to his mouth.

“Something you want to say, Johnny?” Wise’s eyes narrowed.

“If there are ghosts or other creatures in Zebulon, so be it,” he blurted. “No point in carryin’ on about it.”

“How do you kill a ghost?” Creed said, as if waiting for specific instructions.

“Creed,” muttered Wise, gesturing for the other man to join him in the far corner next to the window. “Can I have a word?”

“Sure.”

“Son,” said Wise, tugging at his gun belt. “You find something about this situation amusing?”

A smirk crawled across Creed’s face. “Guess I just think there’s something interesting about it.”

“Well, knock yourself out,” said Wise. “I guess it takes all kinds. Jes’ don’t be irritatin’ everybody.”

“To tell you the truth, Sheriff, I kinda’ like the excitement. You just tell me what you want me to do and I’ll do it.”

Wise turned back to the rear window of the living room and stepped in next to Ruiz. Dirt devils were rising, spinning across the pasture behind the house. “By golly,” muttered Wise. “Guess I got a man who’ll do something crazy now, if I need something crazy done.”

• • •

His face grown warm, Dave backed away from the fire in the woodstove and noticed Deputy Ruiz’s knees were making nervous little movements as if she were about to wet herself. When he put a hand on her shoulder it felt as if the deputy’s fear had somehow jumped into his own body. His legs felt suddenly de-boned, about to give out from under him, so he sat abruptly on the sofa. He had Rachel to protect, and Leo and Zack. And Beatricia. And he had already cost Leveaux his life by refusing to flee Zebulon with his family.

“What have you figured out?” said Wise from his post at the window.

Dave was too dizzy to realize, for a moment, that the sheriff was talking to him. “Dave,” said Wise. “What’ve you got there in your hand?”

“Oh,” muttered Dave, slamming his eyelids shut against the spinning room.

The sheriff took the printout from Dave and read it out loud, barely moving his lips. The article was from the local paper, the *Eastern Shore Times*, dated Wednesday, April 30, 1988. The caption read, “Jewish Scholar Burns to Death on Passover.”

A reclusive, much published Jewish scholar, Nuno Sievers, was found severely burned in the bomb shelter of a dilapidated house on the outskirts of Zebulon. EMTs transported him to the

local Northfield-Accomac Memorial Hospital, and later, to the burn unit at Johns Hopkins. After repeated revival attempts over a two-week period, Sievers died on Thursday. Sheriff David Doughty of Northfield County has confirmed that the fire was arson. The case is considered a homicide.

Four suspects are being held at the Northfield County Jail without bond. The suspects are being represented by Onancock attorney, Tripper Enwright, who has denied that his clients are "skinheads," as alleged by Sheriff Doughty.

The sheriff whistled. "How 'bout it," he said. "The suspects were represented by Mayor Enwright. That means they were probably skinheads, probably guilty, and probably got off."

"You've got that right," said Crockett.

The sheriff continued reading, frown deepening.

According to sources, Sievers was forcibly wrapped in sheets and old rags which had been soaked in kerosene, then set on fire, along with his house, and thrown into his bomb shelter. An eyewitness, a minor, ran into the burning cellar, threw some blankets over Mr. Sievers to smother the flames, and called the Nassawadox fire department.

Dr. Sievers was a retired Professor of Iberian Art History at NYU and had published numerous articles in newspapers and national magazines. He is survived only by two distant cousins. His nearest relative, Sylvie Chagall, has confirmed that Sievers suffered a nervous breakdown in 1980 after a complicated divorce and had moved to the rural Eastern Shore to live in the woods in seclusion.

"It's a good bet Enwright had something to do with the whole thing," said Crockett.

"Maybe something with what we're facing right now."

"Mother of God." The sheriff lumbered over to Lev, who was sitting in a chair by the hearth staring at the articles. He handed him the printer-warmed page. "This is the man whose house we found in the woods."

"God. Beatricia was right." Dave slumped on the sofa, eyes still closed, hand pressed against his forehead. "N-U-N-O. She's been mumbling that name for weeks."

"Let's wake the old broad up," said Creed, looking over Lev's shoulder, squinting at the words.

Lev finished reading. Swords of fire cast shadows across his sallow cheeks. He stood, hunched as if still cold. "What now?"

He handed the paper to Deputy Crockett, whose long, sturdy fingers held it carefully. Crockett studied one page in the firelight, then passed it over to Deputy Ruiz, who let it fall to the carpet, then plopped herself down in a rocker, fingers gripping the carved lion arms.

"Lookie here." Wise returned the paper to the top of the stack, then went to the front bay window and pointed to the south. "I know that ain't no scarecrow."

Dave slowly rose from the sofa, leaving a faint impression in the chenille upholstery and came to stand next to Wise.

In the dark, outlined by flash lightning, the Sheltons' driveway to its right, stood the smoky white shape of a man, arms extended on either side.

Dave blinked several times, then checked his friends to see if they saw it too. He realized the village of Zebulon had been flung in at the deep end, and the remaining posse was totally unprepared for the reckonings of actual tormented souls from the hereafter. And this was, in his opinion, what accounted for the very great losses of his four neighbors and one young deputy. They'd suffered out there. They'd been casualties of a war they'd never signed up to fight.



The energy gathering in the potato cellar of Nuno Sievers' house had been replicating all day. It streamed out the door left open by Dave and took to the air in search of hosts, as if it were a living thing. Dave had a feeling in his gut he'd made a mistake by not closing the hatch. Now, he had a momentary vision of a turbulent green force growing exponentially like a virus and then flying through the air as a radio signal. At a cellular tower in Zebulon, it formed a presence and wavered there, ghostly, waiting for Sheriff Wise to dial the state police. When the call finally came, the energy leapt with such force the sheriff's smart phone exploded in his hand.

"Yow," he cried, dropping the smoldering aluminum corpse.

Ruiz shouted with alarm. The sheriff, breaking down, had finally agreed to call the state police again for back up. And now this. Dave ran for the phone in the foyer and put the receiver to his ear. No use. Dead. They were cut off. A specter now stood in his front yard, immobile, arms outstretched like a scarecrow's.

Lev and Creed crowded the front windows. A series of flashes lit a creature nailed by its palms to watery air.

"We're going to die," said Deputy Ruiz, standing by the baby grand, legs shaking. Having glimpsed the creature once, she refused to turn again toward the window.

"I'm guessing we won't," said Wise.

“Not likely,” Creed cocked his rifle. “I could take a shot at that thing.”

“It might be human,” said the sheriff.

“It’s not fucking human,” said Creed. “But I’m going to take a shot at it anyway.”

He snapped open the latch and started to pull up on the window frame before the sheriff could stop him. A blast of rain soaked his pants. Dave threw himself in front of Creed and slammed the window shut.

“No,” Dave said. “There’s a chance it’s a person. Maybe a kid.”

“It’s not human,” Lev said, lips tight, the scar crinkling. “There’s no chance of killing it.

Not like that!”

Dave sat by the stove and put his head in his hands. The hearth had grown so hot that it seemed to be toasting his skin. But his fingers and ears and the tip of his nose still felt like ice. To think deeply, he shut his eyes and spoke to himself quietly, his lips moving.

“Maybe we should all turn tail,” said the sheriff.

“No,” said Dave, “That won’t do my two boys any good. Remember the Harper children, blown to bits in Sharpsburg.”

“Impossible to forget,” said the sheriff. “You’re right to think of it.”

“They’re both first-born,” said Dave, rubbing the coarse shadow of an early beard. “I’m not Zack’s biological dad.”

“Reckon I recollect that, too,” said the sheriff, “Anybody here a first-born son, but Leo and Zack?” Lev and Crockett raised their hands.

“Jesus,” said the sheriff.

“Maybe that thing in the yard is just a scarecrow,” said Dave. “Put here to scare us—to keep us here until something else comes along.”

“Whatever it is,” said the sheriff. “It might not have anything against anyone here who’s not a first-born son.”

“How about Leveaux?”

“I don’t know,” said Wise. “He may have been a first-born son, or simply someone who was getting in the way.”

“Damn my soul.” Deputy Ruiz fished in her pockets and pulled out the keys to her Charger.

Wise looked at Ruiz, and shook his head. The slight movement was just within Dave's perception. Wise was worried about her. Dave could see that. He didn't envy the sheriff's responsibility for his deputies. He imagined the sheriff's worry must be clawing at his gut. Ruiz had joined the force only months before. She had children to feed and her husband was out of work.

The sheriff's tone was gentle, tinged with real concern. "I guess you're fit to be drowned in a barrel, Deputy. You want to skedaddle."

"I think the thing outside is just a scarecrow," she said. "Even if it's not, it's probably not after me."

"It's up to you."

"I'm going to get help," said Ruiz, snapping up her raincoat. "But I can't take being here anymore. This waiting."

Wise turned toward the men. "Nobody's gonna try to shoot that thing outside unless I say so. Deputy Ruiz's goin' for help—to the state police. Failing that, to the sheriff's office at Accomack. Deputy Ruiz, you get yourself out the side door and make a run for your car while we keep an eye on that thing from the porch. If it starts to move toward you, we'll lay down a field of fire that will tear it apart."

"Sounds like roses to me, Sheriff. I'll go straight to the Hornsby station."

"Let's do 'er," said the sheriff.

Lev pulled open a package of size C batteries. They tumbled onto the rectory table. Dave gathered and stuffed them into flashlight handles. From the front window he watched the specter half disappear in the heavy rain and wind-hurled leaves as Deputy Ruiz prepared to bolt, keys in hand.

At the sheriff's command, Creed threw the door open and rushed through it to the porch. Deputy Ruiz broke from the house, dashed past Creed and crunched across the shell driveway through the rain to her patrol car, then slammed its door shut.

In an instant, she switched on the headlights. Wipers slapped the water from her windshield.

"Move it," muttered Dave. "Jesus."

Ruiz revved the Charger's engine, drawing no response from the specter in the front yard. The car backed into a rosebush and turned around in the driveway, headed toward the empty street,

then stopped, like a horse refusing a jump.

Something must be wrong with the woman's brain, thought Dave. The rain was streaming from the sky, and Ruiz just sat there in the car like a tourist under a waterfall.

The veil of water seemed impenetrable, yet something was appearing on its other side. Dave blinked. A shape, a darkening form. Could Ruiz see it too? He rubbed his eyes to clear away the apparition, but there it remained, gaining bulk, solidity—a phantom with the spread-open arms of a man, drifting toward the police car, as if seen from the other side of a shower curtain. Dave Shelton's heart was beating like an uncontrollable, insidious drum, but there was no way to slow it. Every inch of his body ached with cold. He was shouting, but seemed to hear his own voice from a distance. The world was suddenly upside down, and he was spinning. Still, he could make out the figure approaching the cascade of water that tumbled over the car. *Mr. Petty! From Daisyland!*

"Drive away, Ruiz," mumbled Dave.

The sheriff screamed, waved his arms, leapt forward. "Ruiz! Get out of here." Just then, the deputy floored it.

The patrol car roared to life and shot down the driveway and across the street. It blasted into a crape myrtle and burst into flames.

Dave bolted for the door.

Wise tackled Dave from behind like a linebacker and pulled him down. "No one goes out! Not on my watch. She's dead!"

"I gotta get her." Dave said.

"There ain't no her," said the sheriff. "Just pieces of her. I'm in charge. No one else goes out."

• • • •

Swimming up from her night terror, away from the winged shadow of a grackle that dove at her from a black sky, Rachel woke with a start. She found herself slumped on a stool, leaning over the butcher block in the kitchen. She was sweating, shaking, fingernails digging into the hard maple. Night terrors were like that. They obliterated all else. They would strike in dreams and dissipate before she woke. They were about the same vague monster, a flying creature pursuing her. And each time she

woke, she was left with only a shadow of the flashing wing.

And the lingering odor of charred skin. For seconds, her inner and outer worlds were obliterated, and she would know only the free-floating intense anxiety brought about by the dream.

Since their marriage, Dave would usually be beside her when she woke trembling. But, today, he wasn't. She found herself in the kitchen alone, struggling to reorient herself, only groggily concluding she'd fallen asleep. She looked down and brushed Oreo crumbs off her chest.

From a distant room, Dave was shouting something unintelligible. Footsteps stomped through the dining room and thumped on the side porch. Instead of leaping up, Rachel sat very still and took several slow, deep breaths.

Memories of Aristino snapped into her mind, one after another: the beautiful horse using his prehensile nose to open the door latch; wandering around the barn, hanging his head over a stall and dipping his nose into the waterer; in the tack room, nudging a saddle and jiggling a bit; wandering through the double Dutch doors and around the arena; pulling carrots out of the small square garden ten yards from the back door of the kitchen. And, always, lifting his head, pricking his ears, nickering, looking for her.

When Aristino had been shot by goose hunters, she'd cried for days. No, weeks. Sometimes she cried even now, almost a year later.

Rachael took her own pulse, then rubbed the artery in her neck, the carotid bulb, to slow her heart. Water dripped from the kitchen faucet. Rain was still beating on the window—not surprising, since the sky had been spitting rain when she fell asleep. But the thick darkness outside was new. This night was different somehow. It had come too fast, and there was no daylight remaining, only the whine of wind and branches scraping the windows like ragged fingernails.

She thought of calling for help, but dismissed the idea. There was no point. She was okay. The terror was over. All she needed was to get up from her chair and continue making supper. The men would be finishing up their silly research, and whether or not they deserved it, she would feed them.

Any resentment could be voiced later. Thank God, her mother was safely put to bed and had ceased her nonstop chatter. Rachel's fear was subsiding. Maybe because of, rather than in spite of, the night terror. She'd begun having night terrors as a child. Their passing had always left a pleasant haziness. A sense of security, step by step, took their place, as if the terror itself was a cleansing device for the spirit.

She stood and collected an assortment of pots and pans from the iron hanger. Between gusts, the house stood in stern silence, broken only by the sounds of men talking fearfully.

Then, she heard heavy hooves approaching the back door of the kitchen, the one that led out to the east pasture and the stables, where her horses were doubtless waiting out the storm in the warm comfort of their pine-chip bedding. The wind had subsided, and Rachel thought she heard a snort.

She listened closely. Quiet, and then a nicker. The rain resumed. She dribbled oil in a frying pan, turned on the flame, and dumped in a bowl of diced peppers. The rain backed off again. Another snort.

One of the younger horses—Magistrate, perhaps—must have escaped his stall and come to the brick porch behind the kitchen. And she would have to get him back to the barn, and check the doors and fencing, or have Lev do it.

Rachel peered out the window over the sink. Rain streaked the glass so that nothing was visible. She pulled her raincoat off a hook in the butler's pantry and put it on quietly, then eased open the back door. Outside, the porch light failed to make much headway against the buttress of black air drizzling mist.

Something large stood at the end of the porch, stomping a hoof and scraping its neck against a column.

Rachel blinked a few times, waiting for her pupils to widen.

"MG," she scolded, approaching the soaked, muddy horse. But no—this animal was much too large to be Magistrate. She extended a hand to the furry muzzle just as the lightning flashed. She screamed so loudly the sound of her own voice roared back at her. "Aristino!"

She snapped back the outstretched hand and smelled his grassy breath on her fingertips. "Oh God!" She shook her head and slapped her cheeks to make sure she was awake, and threw

her arms around the horse's neck. She felt his breath against her nape and stepped back away to look at him again, questioning his solidity, his reality.

How could this be? Her beloved horse was dead. She and Dave had buried him themselves with the backhoe. Had the foul-smelling creature that had almost run them down in the woods—had it been Aristino, after all?

But this Aristino, the one before her, smelled like horse, not like a grave. Had the rain simply washed him clean? Could it be that he'd been less than fully formed before, but now was whole? It felt as if the thunderstorm had migrated from the field and into her head. Were ghosts then real? For here was a ghost. Had she been wrong?

She hummed to soothe him as she examined his flesh. Should she be afraid? If this was a specter, it wasn't a hostile thing. Even if sparked to life by Nuno Sievers, it was not his creature, but hers. Unlike men, horses by nature were non-predatory, incapable of evil, regardless of the influence, and so insulated from it.

"I don't know," she said, squeezing the bridge of her nose hard with two fingers. "I don't know what I am either."

She ran a hand over his wet coat, swiping away the dirty water. She slipped a finger up the inside of his cheek, identifying the lateral ridges of his teeth. Then pressed a palm where his heart should be and timed its beating.

So, it is beating!

He was either real, or she was insane. In her mind she had envisioned Aristino's return and now here he was. She smelled his breath. "Alfalfa," she said.

Then, she was psychic, too, as her mother had insisted.

How different Aristino was from the cat, who had the protein-fueled energy of a predator. Aristino had sprung from her love. Not solely from the energy of pain or the torment of an insane man who had been burned to death in a potato cellar in the woods.

All her life, the terrifying bird of her night terrors had been trying to contact her, to bring her something, and now it had.

"Oh, Aristino." She scratched him behind the withers until he lifted his nose and twisted it in bliss. She smiled and made

a knot of the long wet hair that stuck to her neck. Then she felt a block of coldness, as if the air had frozen into ice around her. She could see the horse was shivering, too.

Rachel threw her arms around him and squeezed her eyes shut. Horses had been around longer than marriage and income tax, longer than dogs. She looked up as a bolt of lightning struck the ground out in the north pasture, where Aristino had been buried. The sky lit for a moment. The earth had been supplanted in an unruly pile.

“You’re back.” She smiled.

The rain crystallized into sleet and wrapped its icy darkness around woman and horse.

Rachel took her belt off to fashion a lead to take the horse to the barn. But Aristino arched his neck and let out a worried blow.

“I must let you go. It’s too dangerous here now.” She unbuckled the belt, kissed the horse, inhaling his velvety muzzle, and turned him to face the north woods that would lead to acres of farmland, through a nursery that would end in the next village, Freesburg.

She pulled a few strands of mane, black with a shot of gray through it. “Go on! Come back when this is over.” She gazed into his prismatic brown eyes and got another whiff of grass breath. “Be my spirit guide,” she whispered.

He blew and sighed, then bolted off.



Rachel stepped out of the block of icy air, through the rain, up the steps, and back through the kitchen door. She grabbed an apron off an oak peg and dried her eyes, then her hair and neck.

She held the lock of mane in her hand and brought it up to her nose, inhaling the musky scent, relieved her Aristino smelled like healthy sweat, not the carcass of a dead animal.

Like most nights, she rang the green-splotched copper dinner bell, but this time only to save her voice. It was really a goat bell from her grandmother's village near Corinth. Then she sent Zack and Leo back upstairs with a bowl of grapes to listen to music. Having requested the men to assemble at the dining room table, Rachel sat at the head. The thick odor of boiled beets, slipping from the kitchen, invaded the dining room. "Okay. Tell me what you know."

Everyone looked in surprise. They were tearful.

"Leveaux and Ruiz are both dead," said Wise. "No one else can go outside."

"How did Ruiz die?" she asked.

"Something got a hold of her mind," he said. His face was red.

"Everybody. Let's sit down. We have to plan how we're going to handle this."

Her voice had a new tone—measured, insistent. Even she

could hear it. It was the voice she used at the hospital when a code was called and time was skating away. It was not hysterical, though hysteria tugged.

Each spoke in turn, telling all, offering related details, each adding to the other until theories rose and coalesced into desperate peaks.

Rachel listened. For the sake of the children, for Dave, for them all. She resisted comment, discounting the absurdity of what she heard. She allowed each syllable to transcribe itself as pure data in her brain—as if it were real, which she refused now to doubt. There was no time to consider an alternative to the keystone of their belief. If what she heard wasn't true, there were no leads. Without leads, there was no way out.

A man affected by the Holocaust had been burned alive in a cellar in the forest and now his spirit, seeking vengeance, was killing living things and animating the dead as automatons. So, there might be new postulated spirits to contend with: Mr. Ewell, Mr. Petty, the two Harper boys, now buried in the local cemetery, and now deputies Leveaux and Ruiz. But Aristino. No, not Aristino.

No one had seen the cat lately.

“Almost everyone killed was a first born,” said the sheriff. “Or else maybe got in the spirit's way. Ewell and Petty were oldest sons. The Harper boys were twins. Leveaux and Ruiz might be collateral damage.”

“I bet Leveaux was an eldest son, too” said Dave. “All right,” said Wise. “Let's assume he was.”

“Nuno Sievers was—I mean—is insane.” Lev slid the pepper mill toward the center of the table and looked into the sheriff's face. “He mixes up facts. It doesn't matter if Leveaux was firstborn. And Ruiz is dead. He thinks he's the angel of death attacking the enemies of his people.”

“He'll want to kill our boys,” Rachel said, flatly, wiping beet-stained hands repeatedly on her apron. “Zack is my eldest son. Leo is Dave's.”

“I thought you didn't believe in ghosts.” Dave turned to Rachel, looking into her eyes as if he didn't know her.

“Their existence has been proven to my satisfaction,” she said. “And now there's no alternative explanation.”

• • •

Dave breathed with effort, unnaturally, as if trying to control the volume of air in his lungs. He coughed, realizing air was a shape-shifting substance he had no power over, like the ghost of Nuno Sievers. He sighed. Rachel's intractable disbelief had been a hand-wringing annoyance, but had nevertheless given hope that he was wrong about a tormented spirit possessing Zebulon. Now that she agreed with him, doom seemed certain. How did one fight ghosts—with prayer and persuasion?

He'd long been an atheist. But how could one remain an atheist in the face of ghosts?

It was ironic, he thought, that his transition into a believer in God and ghosts had initially tapped so easily, yet now suddenly struck so hard, with quibbles and regrets. Whereas Rachel's reversal seemed so thorough and easily made; because of whom she was, a scientist first, yes. But also raised in a Roman Catholic household by a mother who was a spiritualist.

Rachel lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it. She leaned over and whispered into his ear. "I saw Aristino. In living flesh. He smelled like grass."

Dave paled, unable to speak. He'd never seen his wife so much in control in such utter chaos. Her two worlds had come together with a howl, not a clatter.

"We must make this angel of death pass over our house," said Lev.

Silence in the room. Palpable consternation. Each looked around at the others, wide-eyed, clueless.

"How?" Rachel said at last.

"I'll take care of it." Lev nodded. "With everyone's help."

• • •

When Rachel got to Beatricia's room, the old woman was waking up. So pale, with a cold flush of moisture like morning dew on her forehead, her palimpsest palm reaching out.

"Don't get up, Mother," Rachel said. "Everything's fine."

"We've gotta work," Beatricia struggled to rise to an elbow, but fell back. She looked toward the night-blackened window.

Rachel heard the scratches of wet branches on the glass, and shuddered.

Beatricia was listening too, her eyes growing wide. She was dressed only in a slip, shivering. “What happened?”

Rachel pulled the quilt up, tucking it under her mother’s chin. “You went too far with your ritual. That’s twice. If you do it again, I’m afraid it could kill you. Your heart.”

“The spirits, Rachel. The dybbuk. Where are Zack and Leo?”

“Zack and Leo are in their rooms.”

“Who does Zack talk to on the landing, Rachel?”

“No one, Mother.”

“Don’t lie to me, dear.”

Rachel paused a moment, thinking. She’d never enjoyed lying to her mother, but there was Beatricia’s failing heart to think of. She probably only had ten percent pump function. She pressed a palm against her mother’s cheek, assaying her health. Pallor, sweating, bluish hands folded on the quilt.

“There has been a death, an accident,” Rachel said at last. “Deputy Ruiz crashed into a tree with her car, at the end of the driveway. The rain put out the fire.”

“That’s two,” Beatricia said. “You have to do something.”

“Lev has a plan,” Rachel bit her bottom lip.

“You have to do something,” Beatricia said. Her eyebrows arched like cathedral windows. “You have the power.”

Rachel heard a heart pounding. First, it seemed to be Beatricia’s, then her own. Beatricia’s steely fingers caught Rachel’s hand. “You’ve always had the gift, Rachel. Even when you were little. You knew what was happening from far away. You talked to spirits in your room before you slept—and then you’d deny it. I know you remember it. You whispered to me about it, and I told you to hush. I shouldn’t have done it, Rachel, but I was afraid. Afraid of it in you, and me.”

“Let’s don’t talk about that now, Mother. You need your sleep.”

“If you don’t remember, it’s because you’re frightened and have been for a long time. You sought refuge by diving into medicine, but that only made it worse. Didn’t it, honey? You stood at the bedsides of the dead and dying and heard them speak.”

“Don’t excite yourself, Mother. I don’t remember any of that, even if it’s true.”

“Go to the landing, Rachel.”

“Okay.” Rachel said, her heart drumming against her ribs, ears filled with the rhythm of it. Neither the wind nor the leaves slapping at the window would let her think.

“Listen, Mother,” said Rachel, as if to plead for forgiveness. “I accept there is something unnatural going on here and I know I can see what others can’t, but some of what you say is nonsense. You need to rest.”

Beatricia squeezed Rachel’s hand tighter. “If that’s what you think, so be it. But go to the landing and just stand there, Rachel...just for a moment. Maybe the house has something to say to you. Maybe it doesn’t.”

Rachel pulled from her mother’s grasp, the resentment inside her stealing her breath, making her dizzy. The room grew suddenly frigid, hoarfrost coating windows like an expanding spider web. Her breath before her assumed the shape of a dirigible plum that expanded one moment, floating, then dissipated the next. Her hand was cold and limp where her mother had touched it.

“All right, Mother. I’ll go.” Rachel backed up a step, as if retreating from a reliquary.

In the hallway, she read the hand-scrawled sign on Leo’s door, “Biohazard: Beware the Socks!” Leo had begun to play the “Connecticut Halftime” on his drum kit, softly with the silencers on, metronome clicking the rhythm. Zack’s door was cracked open, so she pulled it shut, without looking inside, and then walked down the curved flight of stairs to the landing.

She stood on the landing by the settee, afraid of what would happen, if she opened the door.

A long minute went by.

She heard a fluttering, as if a sparrow had flown down a chimney and was beating at the bricks to escape.

Everyone in Zebulon had heard about the ghosts of Mr. Nelson, and his granddaughter, Isabel. Legend says they appeared at Sunday dinners, but since the 1903 fire, after which the original clapboard house had been replaced by another, the ghostly twosome had been without provenance or portfolio

and had only rarely been whispered of. Still, the rumor of their presence persisted. As nonsense, probably. But, for an instant, Rachel heard the rustling of wings again.

She thought of tiny angels floating down a flue and heard a girl's laughter, only a single giggle at first, and then another.

"Isabel," she said, and then waited. No answer.

She marched back upstairs to Zack's room and pushed open the door. Zack was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the rain.

"How long have you been talking to Isabel and Mr. Nelson?"

"I never talk to Mr. Nelson," Zack said. "He's only left a little shadow of himself."

Rachel felt her ears burn. She had expected a guilty denial that he'd been talking to ghosts, but the tacit admission that he had been talking to Isabel left her momentarily speechless. Zack had betrayed her. Her beautiful, perfect son had betrayed her, perhaps without wanting to or meaning to, but betrayed her nevertheless. She wanted to pull him out of bed and box his ears.

"How long have you been talking to Isabel?" she said, at last, annoyed that he wouldn't look at her.

"That's between Isabel and me," he said.

Rachel held herself in check. The boy was only fourteen.

"Listen to me, Zack. This is not a child's game. We're in danger of losing our lives."

"Isabel has nothing to do with that," said Zack. "She felt something coming and told me to get out of the house—and I didn't do it. Now she won't open the door."

"Door? What door?"

"The closet door on the landing."

"Is Isabel in the closet?"

"She speaks to me through the door, but won't open it anymore. We used to sit in there and play cribbage."

"Look at me, Zack."

Zack turned his head toward Rachel. His eyes were red. He'd been crying.



The dybbuk of Nuno Sievers was busy assembling itself into the shape of the angel of death in the potato cellar of his burned-down house in the woods. He'd crouched for hours in the dank ruins of his past life in crepuscular form. Since early morning, he'd been feeding on the panic that engulfed Zebulon and absorbing the residual energy within his sodden hole, sending forth rain and wind while he gathered strength. Animating first the shell of a cat, then a horse, then the bodies of men. He'd watched a cluster of them creep down the ladder of his shelter and rifle through his papers and photographs. Biding his time, he'd elected to leave his records in orderly piles rather than scattering them about like the leaves outside.

He was learning. Thrice before, he had ventured out prematurely without finding relief or escape, leaving himself furious and in expanding pain. But this time it would be the night of Passover, he was sure of that. The moon was wailing. His cause was righteous. Soon he would inflict vengeance on the wicked and those that protected them, like the man in the pasture and the fool in the car. And then, at last, he could surrender his own agony.

Oh, he knew about suffering. As a child, he had sent an element of himself out of one finger and touched the emaciated face of a man who was suffocating beneath a pile of the dead

at Belsen. That fragment of his soul had come back burnt and shriveled, blackened and throbbing with an ache that sent its fire through his being—his first touch of flame. Then a blister lifted. He had also let a shadow of himself fly into the soul of a raped and dying child and that too had burnt. After that, he'd felt a hot bullet rip through a pregnant woman's lung and howled with fury as it tore through her heart. Then, he cried out, kneeling beside her body. Blood poured from his throat, blinding and choking him as if she were, then and ever after, a part of him.

The next day, or the day after, he'd watched his parents and brothers hang and felt the rough hemp knots snapping thin necks. The same burning blood poured from his nose and flushed from his mouth as his bowels evacuated. Later, much later, when he was a man and hiding out in this cabin in the woods, he'd felt an overwhelming pain of body and spirit that refused to blister and pop. He'd lost an eye, his wife, and finally his job in New York as a historical journalist specializing in the Holocaust, as if writing about it would drive the demons from his mind. And there had been teenagers, a gang of skinheads he'd spotted in Zebulon hanging around the post office and outside the country store.

The four of them had turned up with their Nazi paraphernalia, armbands and daggers of the Hitler Youth. They'd wrestled him down, laughing and shouting, binding his arms and legs with kerosene-soaked rags they'd lit with long wooden matches. He squirmed against the ligatures, bucking and biting. But they only hurled him into the cellar, then set his house aflame.

The voices had come to him then. Terrible, demonic voices. As the skin on his limbs burned, split, and bubbled, he'd heard again and again, as if from afar, "Let my people go! Let my people go."

But from whom had the words come, and to whom had they been they addressed? He could've thought more clearly if there hadn't been bolts of fire roaring through his frying nerves. The voices had been raspy, deep and satiric. Should they have promised comfort even as big-knuckled hands grasped his hair and jerked him off the ground, pulling out patches of scalp? Until he'd found himself, floating in air, ablaze, and a second pair of hands had stretched his jaws open, cracking his mandible.

Within seconds, a white plaque had covered him from foot to crown. He'd fought to shut his eyelids to keep their globes from melting. Next came the deep, deep charring, first of his arms and legs and then of his face and torso. Within moments he was blind. Oozing fluids through on his remains, as if to belatedly put out the flames. Fat was sizzling, driving spikes of pain deep into the nubs of what remained of his limbs. There'd been the sound of unchecked screaming and the momentary notion that the screaming was his own.

He'd wanted to fly, but when his bonds burned away, he was left thrashing on the floor, legless, armless, like a dying larva. He'd remained conscious, so his unearthly outcry had surged like a tide breaking over a shore while some of his nerve endings had been cremated and dissolved into numbness and others still roared with agony. The heat had cooked muscle, tendon, and ligament, which should have been fatal, but yet he'd raved on, until the boys had run from the building they had torched and a siren from a fire engine had broken through the screaming.

In the cellar, he had died, as the house collapsed above him. Glass had flown everywhere, slashing his singed flesh. A man with cool breath had hovered over him, beating against his sternum, which struck his bruised heart. He had died again on the stretcher, then again in the ambulance. In the hospital, he had died and come back to life again and again, an endotracheal tube down his throat, a machine keeping him breathing, drugs burning his veins. He had been silently calling out for his mother and for Sylvie.

The energy of the cellar had expanded each time the paramedics had revived him. He passed out of this world and jolted back into it again and again. In and out, for days. And every time he died, he returned to the cellar—his photographs, his manuscripts, his memories. The room's energy had become a pump, amplified by each resuscitation, and now its power was beginning to spew life back into his form. It had gathered itself together from the force of his *sauros*, his despair, when he'd lived in his hermitage, the basement. It had magnified itself in the enclosed space below ground, and, even now, twenty years after his death, it was giving him substance and reaching out, through him, to create ghostly forms.

It was the night of the Passover, of that he was sure. He was sure of nothing else. He didn't know his name. He wept and howled with pain. The smell of burning fat and bone filled the cellar and he drifted in and out of consciousness, each passage more painful than the last, his reforming flesh searing and charring like a rib-eye tossed on a griddle, throwing off clouds of black smoke.

Let my people go. There were smoking ovens to open and the eldest born to slaughter; then, he would find the portal and be released as though a great red sea were opening. Black night would throw its cloak over his shoulders, cooling his emergent body, and he would feel no pain.

He could feel arm buds sprout and legs grow under him, so he knelt in the cellar as if in prayer, his rage ever-building, even as his seared limbs blackened in the fire that engulfed them. Where there wasn't blood on the doors of the houses there would be blood within. Then, he would find the portal and kill its guardians, cooling his body in their shed blood as if it were an icy rain.

Now fully formed of scorched flesh and ashen bone, he felt anger surge up hot and merciless inside him as the energy of the cellar rushed into his spirit, threatening to explode. He howled with the pressure of the animal magnetism that grew exponentially in the basement. Two nubs budded out of his shoulder blades and the nubs sprouted black feathers and cartilage that grew into black wings.

He convulsed as his wings unfurled. He readied himself for it, steeling himself, like a mad thing doomed. He heard his teeth clacking in his mouth of ignited ashes, and his mind let go its moorings and lifted from its casing. Blood sprang from his gums and he swallowed it, retching. He felt himself rising, crashing again and again into the cracked ceiling, falling back, rising again with velocity, falling back until, by chance, as before, all obstacles gave way, and he at last soared through the open basement door.



Dave rushed to stand beside Wise, who was leaning against the sill of the living room window, thighs pressed into the wood. The sheriff's eyes were fixed on a second ghostly-white specter in the backyard by the tarp. The creature's outstretched arms glowed in the moonlight, flames crackling in its palms.

"It ain't moved a bit," said the sheriff. "I'm guessin' it had nothing to do with Deputy Ruiz's car slamming that tree."

"Maybe not," said Dave, gripping the St. Christopher medal that hung from his neck. "Of course it had everything to do with Leveaux," he said, thinking he'd uttered a stupid thing as soon as it passed his lips. His fingers tightened around the medal. Blood rushed to his forehead. Fear had given way to anger. His hands cramped into fists. That thing outside. That evil thing. The creature had taken over the back pasture. His own land. It had encroached on his life.

"Lookee here." Creed drew the drapery on the other side of the room wide open. "It looks like an old friend is trying to help that new one surround us."

Dave hurried to Creed's side and crouched at the front window of the living room like a wild dog preparing to attack. There, in the falling rain, loomed the specter of Mr. Petty in the form of a scarecrow forty feet from the house in the front yard, hands aflame.

“It don’t mind being seen,” said the sheriff, scratching something down in his flip-top notebook.

Unlike the back pasture, which offered nothing in the way of concealment, the front yard boasted a small manicured maze of trees and foliage that Dave had planted after the stately homes of colonial Williamsburg. It would have been a small matter for the ghost to stand behind one of the two Norwegian maples or the groomed English boxwood that grew head high, but, instead, it stood in plain view as if inviting Dave to shoot it, or try. Dave could smell cat piss from the hedge even from inside, wondering how the stink leaked in.

“If the fella in the front yard is Mr. Petty,” the sheriff ran a hand over his hair as if to smooth it into place, “then the fella’ out back must be the former Mr. Ewell.”

“If we’ve got to worry about the dead coming back to life,” said Dave, “there’s also Leveaux and Ruiz.”

“Don’t want to fret about that,” said the sheriff.

“Maybe we don’t have to worry about how many there are,” said Lev, standing behind them, looking at Dave’s most recent painting, the one of the grapes and the ram’s horn. “Maybe we just need to worry about Passover.”

Dave caught himself in a fantasy in which he was dousing the scarecrows in the yard with gasoline and then striking a match.

“We can seal the house against the Angel of Death,” said Lev.

“Nonsense,” said Creed.

“Creed’s right,” said the sheriff. “I believe in my Bible as much as the next guy, but I’d bet my last nickel that the Angel of Death has nuthin’ to do with this business...”

“You believe in ghosts,” said Lev. “Don’t you?”

“Now, I do,” said the sheriff. “But that’s about it.”

Dave considered the still-wet canvas of the ram horn and the grapes, but didn’t remember painting it. There was something premonitory about it, as if Dave had channeled something supernatural. As if the painting and its freshness had meaning. “Let Lev talk,” he said.

“What if what we have here is a ghost,” said Lev. “One who believes he’s the Angel of Death. And these specters, or whatever you want to call them, are somehow controlled by him.”

A ram horn and grapes did have something to do with

Passover, thought Dave. There's wine and a cup.

"What makes you think these ghosts we're looking at aren't the whole show?" said Wise.

"They're just standing there, Sheriff," said Lev. Maybe just waiting. Besides, our best information leads to Nuno Sievers. One man. And I bet we haven't seen him yet."

"We're dealing with a couple of murderers," said Creed. "This ain't no Occam's Razor.

This is bullshit."

"I don't think so," said Lev. "This is about Passover. And if there's no such thing as an Angel of Death, why does it matter? If the ghost thinks he's the Angel of Death, he'll respond like the Angel of Death."

"I think Lev has a point," Dave said. "We'd better listen."

"We'll conduct a Seder to convince this Angel of Death we're Jewish," said Lev. "We'll need blood."

"Whoa," moaned Creed.

"No problem," said Dave, his anger waning.

"It's a stretch," said the sheriff.

"Sure is," said Dave.

"It's complex," said Lev. "At Passover, Jewish families were supposed to find a perfect male, yearling lamb and care for it until the fourteenth of the month. Each family slaughtered the lamb that evening and gathered the blood and smeared it on doorframes of houses. Later they ate the lamb."

"So we sacrifice an animal?" said Creed. "And then we eat."

"We eat," said Lev. "With flatbread and bitter herbs."

"No, thank you," said the sheriff.

"Who's going to go outside and smear the blood on the doorframes?" said Creed. He seemed eager.

"We don't have a lamb," said Dave.

"Maybe we can do it with a TV dinner," said Creed.

"We don't have to do it right," said Lev. "We can fake it."

"You're right," said Rachel, helping her mother descend the last step of the staircase.

Dave turned away from the window and found Rachel and Beatrice behind him in the foyer. Leaning on both canes, Beatrice smoothed her purple caftan. She looked like a regular Madame Blavatsky.

“It’s got to be done,” said Beatricia. “And it’s not a joke either.”

“There’s a ghost in the front yard and one in the back,” said Dave.

“Of course, there are,” said Beatricia.

“How long have you been listening?” Dave rubbed the St. Christopher medal with a thumb. It felt like the image was flattening, disappearing.

“Long enough,” said Beatricia, a small smile coming to her lips. “Phil, get me a seat.” Wise offered Beatricia his arm, and escorted her to a chair at one head of the dining room table.

Dave stoked the fire, feeling better. But a flame flared within him. “Let the son of a bitch come.”

“Okay,” said Rachel. “Let’s go over the preparations, Lev. I know we have to fake it, but let’s stay as close to the book as possible.”

“Here’s what I remember,” said Lev. “We got to try our best to make utensils look kosher. Stuff never before used. Like plastic forks and knives and paper plates.”

“We have plenty,” said Dave.

“The Angel won’t know the difference,” said Lev.

“This Angel isn’t holy,” said Dave.

“Dumb Angel,” said Creed.

Lev’s features were inscrutable, except for his scar, which crinkled a bit. “We gotta get rid of all leavened bread from everywhere. There’s no bread in anyone’s car, is there? We need to get it in a garbage bag and throw it out on the street.”

“I’ll do it,” said Creed. “I can get by that scarecrow out front.”

“Ruiz didn’t make it to the street,” Dave said, shaking his head.

“I know it can use tractors and cars as weapons,” said Creed. “I’ll be careful.”

Lev put a hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “How long ago has the house been thoroughly cleaned?” he said.

“How would I know? I had to work.” Rachel frowned and cut her eyes at Dave. Only for a moment, but it was one nasty habit he didn’t like in his wife.

“The maid was in Wednesday,” said Dave. “She left a pile of laundry unfolded by the bed.”

“Stupid bitch,” said Creed. “I told you she was fat and lazy. You should’ve hired Luisa. We’ve had her for five years. She even cleans Libba’s car. Vacuums out the dog hair. Now, that’s a maid.”

Lev turned to Dave. “We’ll trust your housekeeper’s cleaning, then.” Lev oriented the chairs squarely, and wiped down the dining room table with a paper towel. “But, in case the ghost looks in, we should make a show of cleaning shelves, the sink, the stove. And cover them if we can. We need to clean off countertops and eating surfaces.”

“I can handle all of that,” said Rachel.

“The traditional search for leavened bread is always a problem.” Lev opened the butler’s pantry. “We’re supposed to search for it with a feather by candlelight the night before Passover. But that time’s passed. Let’s get the candles. We need to put one in each window to show that the bread has been searched for.” He shrugged. “It might work. Since this Death Angel is probably insane. Who knows what he remembers.”

“I can help set them out.” said Beatrice. “At least, downstairs.”

“The biggest problem,” said Lev. “Is the slaughter of a lamb.” He slumped, his anxiety plain. “Since we don’t have a lamb, I suggest we use a chicken. That entails running out to the barn, catching one, and then killing it in the kitchen sink.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “To be kosher.”

Thinking of this, Dave could feel a cramp coming in his contracting forehead. “Then I guess we have to spread its blood on the doorframes.”

“Fine,” said Creed. “If I survive dumping the bread in the street, I’ll run out to the barn for a chicken, bolt back to the house, then slit its throat and smear the doors with blood.”

“We can’t ask that much of you,” said Dave, frowning about the chicken.

“I’ll dump the bread in the street,” said Crockett. “If that thing out front gets me, it gets me.”

“I’ll do the rest,” said Creed.

“No, you won’t,” said Dave. “If you go for the chicken, I’ll spread the blood.”

“Fine,” Creed sauntered toward the stove. “But if anyone

falters, I'll do all of it." He paused. "Just tell my wife that I volunteered. By the way. I'm no longer in the CIA. They said I took too many unnecessary risks."

"Let's not forget to get rid of all the alcohol. Except wine," said Lev. "No beer. No fermented grains. And, oh yes, anything containing grain alcohol. Perfume, cologne, hair spray hair tonic, shaving lotion, mouthwash. Trash the spray deodorant. Sheriff Wise, it might be a good idea if you go take a shower."

"I took one less than an hour ago," said the sheriff.

"Yeah," said Lev. "But you used products. I can smell the cologne. Polo?"

Dave laughed to himself. He'd been wanting to dump all that stuff anyway.



As the household searched from top to bottom for offending edibles and fermented grains to dump, Sheriff Wise took a shower, resisting the impulse to linger under the hot spray. He would have loved to spend an hour scrubbing himself clean, then taking numerous, punctilious steps in his grooming. Stripping away hair tonic and residues of after-shave and deodorant left him feeling naked, even when he was dressed.

His ego was shot. Far from congratulating himself on being the first living mortal to discern the supernatural elements of the case, unless Beatricia had beaten him to it, he berated himself for not figuring out what to do about it. How did Lev put the pieces of the puzzle together quicker than he? There had to be more to it than the young man had divined, but what? It was a sheriff's job to be prescient, but he had struggled to dissect the case from the first. It seemed to him that he had spent a lot of time thinking about it, but why did his thinking produce no discernible results? Why was his brain so sluggish? There was motive to consider.

If vengeance alone was the ghost's *raison d'être*, why didn't Sievers search out neo-Nazis, or the boys who'd killed him, now grown men? Why attack the line of houses on Burnt Chestnut in an eastward direction, regardless of who lived there? What was he moving toward? And was the Shelton's house a final

destination, as the attack date, Passover, implied? Or was it only the next stop on an endless journey of mayhem. Was the ghost truly that confused—that insane?

Wise tucked in his shirttail and straightened his belt, centering the buckle. He sat on a red velvet bench in the dressing room connected to the master suite. Resting his forehead in his hands, he pondered.

Then an idea came to him. One that explained Nuno Sievers' motivation, at least in part. It was almost a given that in its confused, protoplasmic mind, the ghost equated Egyptians and their first-born with Nazis, and the males of Zebulon with his own killers. Both the Nazis and the Egyptians were oppressors of the Jews. Both had tortured them, killed them, enslaved them. What's more, according to one of the articles Sievers wrote, Nazi and Egyptian symbology had common elements. After all, the Swastika was an ancient Egyptian symbol of eternity.

Beyond vengeance and a desire to free his people from oppression, perhaps the ghost was clear, sane, driven by an incorrect, but, in his gnarled mind, syllogistically valid purpose.

Maybe the ghost saw the Sheltons' house as a road to survival. Perhaps it wasn't important that the houses were invaded in an eastern direction; but rather, that they were merely in a row, leading to a specific destination.

What do the dead really want? To go to the light and step into it. What if the ghost was headed to the light, killing first-born sons, bumps in the road, as he raged? And others as they got in his way.

Wise coughed to clear his head, disappointed his idea didn't really work out. There was no spiritual light, now, as far as he knew, in Zebulon.

He combed his hair and walked downstairs. Two garbage bags of leavened bread and products containing grain alcohol had been set by the door to the side porch. The crew had scraped the cupboards clean of liquor, perfumes, mouthwash.

Rachel and Beatricia, supported by one of her canes, were finishing up scouring the kitchen counters, sinks, and cooking surfaces. Lev was swabbing down the dining-room table. Deputy Crockett was preparing himself by means of prayer and meditation to gather up the garbage bags for his run to the street.

Creed was manning the dining-room window, looking through binoculars at the activities of the foggy facsimile of Revel Petty in the front yard. It still stood motionless, arms spread wide, flames rising from upturned palms.

“Everything ready?” Wise slipped on his bomber jacket and prepared to step out onto the porch. Now here will be a fight! He remembered his time in Desert Storm, and a cold spot sprung up in his stomach and rose to lodge in his heart. He grabbed at a lancinating pain in his chest. Someone would be needed to cover Crockett every inch of the way. Dave stepped up in his heavy yellow raincoat, cradling a rifle, and posted beside the door. To give Crockett a sendoff, Rachel and Beatricia stepped quietly into the dining room in matching white aprons, each with a clean-up rag over one shoulder. Lev rose from the table. Rachel and Beatricia both made the sign of the cross.

“Good luck, Crockett.” Sheriff Wise stood proud of his man, brave when it came right down to it.

The deputy opened the door and then paused. “If I take upon myself the defeat,” he said, quoting the Dalai Lama, “then I offer to others the victory.” The rain poured down in sheets as fiercely as before. It blew across the porch, slapped his ankles, and soaked the dining room floor, depositing leaves and the wrinkled petals of spring flowers.

Zebulon seemed an island hunched in a turbid sea: no gleaming moonlight, no streetlights, nor lit windows ablaze, no headlights of cars, nor trucks prowling their way through the deep dark. Plastic drawstrings wrapping his hands, Crockett picked up two stuffed garbage bags, and threw each one over his shoulders.

“I’m going as far as the porch steps,” said the sheriff, his flashlight on. “I’ll train the light on the scarecrow in the front yard, in case it moves. Might distract him.” He stood behind Crockett, who approached the door.

“Don’t worry ’bout me,” said Crockett, his long legs tensed to sprint.

“Be guided by your feet,” said the sheriff. “There’s no moon. When you leave the porch, you’ll feel the brick walkway that leads to the driveway at the side of the house. Then, at the drive, there’ll be the crunch of shells. When you feel that, turn right

toward the road and run the fifty feet to the street.”

“Alright, sheriff.” Crockett nodded.

All in plain view of the specter in the front yard. The sheriff wondered if the thing could hear. Because of Ruiz, he knew it could see.

Crockett lumbered across the porch, struggling to balance the trash bags, the sheriff behind him. At the edge of the porch, Wise pointed his flashlight at the face of the scarecrow.

Revel Petty, as suspected. The sheriff shuddered, almost dropping the slippery metal flashlight. He gripped it with both hands and steadied the beam. He'd known Mr. Petty, used his services as a landscape architect. Had gone fishing for flounder with him in Dingley's Creek. But this...*thing*...he hardly recognized. The new face was mime-white, locked in a grimace that blew both cheeks up, like the white underbellies of blowfish. Its eyes were red marbles, glinting in the flashlight's beam.

“Go,” said the sheriff, regretting the syllable as soon as it escaped his lips. “It's attracted to the light.”

Wise couldn't help feeling hollow. He imagined himself doing Crockett's work: feeling for the step with the heel of one boot, easing off the porch into the steel dark night. He thought of all the tasks his deputy would manage stacked up ahead, like chips on a poker table. Crockett would be taking quick, careful strides down the brick path. The sheriff stayed with Johnny in his mind as he imagined rain lashing at the young man's head, soaking his coat, making him shiver. The shells would be crunching underfoot. Time slowed to the creep of an inchworm. The sheriff guided the beam of the Surefire C2, so that the ghost which had been Mr. Petty stood transfixed, like a jack-lighted deer. Thunder rolled across the sky. Wise visualized the deputy taking a first step toward the road, then a second, then trotting to the end of the driveway as Petty remained motionless in the middle of the lawn.

The sheriff grew weak with dread and leaned on the porch rail, knees buckling. The flashlight wobbled. Mr. Petty's ears twitched like a cat's, as if he'd heard something in spite of the rain. Probably Crockett's footsteps. It was then the sheriff saw that the ghost was wearing a linen sport coat, the same shade of white as its face. The coat Petty had worn in the grave had

been slit up the back by the mortician. But this was no creature merely raised from the grave, rather a being of animated dust, coattails blowing forward, flapping at the sides of its body—mouth opening, flashing two rows of sharp triangular teeth.

“Crockett!”

It was probably too late. Wise let the flashlight’s beam jerk to the road. Crockett threw the trash bags onto the street and bolted back up the driveway, his feet churning in the dark—too slow. The sky flashed. Dave and Creed, poised on the porch, opened fire on the scarecrow.

From inside the house, Rachel flicked on the porch light. Crockett was a third of the way up the long drive. Mr. Petty, like a fugitive from a Halloween party, feet now hovering above the ground, swooped with mind-shaking speed to a spot between Crockett and the porch.

“God damn you,” shouted Creed, his target blurring, as if dissolving.

Crockett halted. The thing floated, not five yards before the deputy, separating Crockett from the porch, its arms stretched, as if it were hanging from a cross.

Creed and Dave pumped shot after shot into the mist of Mr. Petty’s back, but the bullets passed through.

“Stop shooting.” Crockett yelled through cupped hands. “Stop, stop.”

“Hold your fire,” said the sheriff. “You’re just keeping Crockett pinned down there.”

Rachel stepped out, the screen door slamming behind her. “Stop.” She walked between the two men and pushed the gun barrels down. “Talk to it,” she said. Beatrice and Lev came out behind her.

“All right,” said the sheriff.

From where he stood on the porch, through the apparition, Wise could see Crockett lean forward. Petty’s arms extended like the forelegs of a praying mantis, ready to strike.

“Don’t do it,” yelled the sheriff.

“I’m going to,” Crockett’s voice was that of a doomed man ready to make a final effort before the executioner arrived.

“I’m going to talk to him,” said the sheriff, fighting for time. “He and I go way back.

Ain't that right, Mr. Petty?"

The ghost said nothing, but held its pose.

"You can't do nothing," yelled Crockett. "It ain't human. Just tell my wife and children I died a brave man. I hate this thing worse than I've hated anything in my life. And I'm going to have to run right through it."

"Let him go," yelled the sheriff. "Mr. Petty, the way I figure it, you must have got some human left in you. There ain't no point in hurting my buddy. Do me the favor of letting him be?"

Beatricia hobbled forward, her canes slipping on the wet porch. Without thinking, Wise reached out an arm and steadied the old woman.

A blast of wind blew rain in her eyes, plastering her grey hair to her head. The wind plucked at her clothes as she spoke to the ghost without yelling, voice cracking. "I knew your mother, Mr. Petty..." She raised one hand, acknowledging its presence.

"God damn it," yelled Crockett. "I can't stand here anymore. I'm going to run through this son-of-a-bitch!"

"I knew your father, too," said Beatricia.

"And may I recognize all things as illusion," chanted Crockett. "And may I be devoid of clinging, released from bondage."

"Please, no," said Sheriff Wise. "Forget the Dalai Lama. Listen to me. That's an order, son!"

But the deputy lowered his head like a fullback preparing to hit the line, and, without hesitating, blasted into the ghost, passed through it, then stumbled out the other side. He fell to his knees then dropped to the ground. As Wise threw up his hands in despair, the deputy commando crawled on his belly.

His body started to fade. In seconds, it was transparent. And, then, at last, it was gone.

And the grayest depression the sheriff had ever known rolled over him like the blanket of fog that had shrouded the sky.



Nuno Sievers flew from the remains of his house and rose to the treetops in the rain before descending to the forest floor. It would be a slow and painful journey on tender wings. His blackened flesh sizzled. But the pounding of his hollow heart, empty of blood, brought new stabs of agony to revived nerve endings. Crosswinds were playing havoc with the new wings, flapping them like loose banners. He needed more time to gather strength. Flight, he had discovered, was exhausting.

Soon all signs of decomposition would be gone, but the injuries that had occurred before his death would remain—his flesh would be charred and black to the bone; a hand and all but three toes would be gone, burned away. His eyes would be useless; his ears burned back to nubs and his nose missing, leaving two black holes.

“Let my people go,” he hissed endlessly. Each time he spoke, he gathered more of the energy that had accumulated in the basement of his home, the site of his murder. He was a conduit, a pipeline. Animal magnetism hurled out of him as he materialized further. He howled as it left him, feeding the dead things of the forest and fields. It held Ewell and Petty in place, watching the Shelton house, and kept Deputy Leveaux in the woods seated on the tractor. It was already rebuilding the shape of Crockett in the driving rain.

“Let my people go,” said Nuno Sievers. Yet such was his grief, so extreme his pain, his waking mind lost track of its objectives. Now and then his thoughts disappeared entirely and he howled mindlessly in the blackness. Then the hunger to kill came washing over him again.



The horror of Crockett's disappearance swept over Rachel. She wrung her hands, twisting her fingers and bending them back past extreme ranges of motion. The space between her eyebrows throbbed, the emotional voltage running haywire just beneath her skin. But when she spoke, calling everyone in the house together, her words were slow but sure, each stamping itself into the overheated air. She imagined herself as the Biblical Deborah, the most glorious judge of Israel, whose song she still recalled.

“Wake up, wake up, Deborah! Wake up, wake up!

Break out in song! Arise, Oh Barak!

Take captive your captives, O son of Abinoam.”

We need a plan, she thought. Channeling Deborah might be a good idea, though not an easy task.

There was no use in concealing anything from the boys. Zack was fourteen and already knew too much. And Leo, eight years old, had to be let in on what was happening, if only to prevent his imagination from taking flight and building a phantasmagoric enemy even worse than the one facing them. They had to be kept informed. Their lives might depend on it. They were both first-born children, after all.

Once again, everyone gathered in the dining room by the roaring stove. This time, Rachel sat at the head of the table. She

nodded to the sheriff. "Go ahead."

"Here's what I figure," said Wise. "I shouldn't have held the flashlight on that spook out there. They're inanimate without light. Ruiz's headlights probably woke it up. And Crockett's death, well it's my fault. I shined that flashlight in Petty's eyes."

Leo's face froze. He made an audible gulp. Rachel had an impulse to take the boy's hand, but let it pass. He was a tough kid, with a brown belt in karate, and had long since stopped coming to her crying when he arrived home from school with bumps on his head. He would adjust. Kids are so adaptable they can scare the shit right out of you.

"There's no way to know for sure about the lights," Rachel said. "Too few cases, but it's possible."

Why had she said that? She had startled even herself by accepting her intuition as a footnotable source. Maybe next she would starve herself, the better to summon spirits.

"What else do we have to go by?" Wise's voice seemed almost lost in the salvo of thunder in the distance and the drone of the rain that sounded too much like the humming of locust wings. Rachel looked out the window, thoughtfully. There were messages in the rain, perhaps sitting in the trees like sparrows.

"We've got to sacrifice a chicken from the barn very soon." Lev opened the door to the wood stove and rolled a log over until it was wrapped in flames.

"We don't have a lamb," said Rachel. A cedar branch snapped, the wind hurling it against the dining room window.

"We need blood," said Lev. "A chicken might do."

Rachel knew it was true the moment he said it. There had to be blood, but she rejected the idea of going to the barn to get it, even though she had no better solution. Beet juice was hardly a substitute.

"We can't go out there," Rachel said. "It's too dangerous."

"We can just wait inside," Dave said, looking into everyone's faces, one by one, but apparently at no one in particular. "Nothing's broken into the house."

"Yet," said Rachel.

"Yet," he agreed.

She closed her eyes and let Dave's words slip away without leaving a mark. They'd not been intended as humorous. On

good days Dave was a semi-savant from his painter's fingers to his architect's brain. But he was also rather often a study in attitudinal behavior and source of cynical or cryptic remarks. Sometimes they helped; sometimes they didn't. Sometimes he was appreciated; sometimes not.

At present, he wasn't.

"Something broke into the Ewell and Petty houses," said Wise. "I guess whatever is after us can break in here too."

"Unless we have blood on the door," said Lev, staring into the sheriff's eyes as if in search of agreement.

"We can cut ourselves," said Rachel, reaching out to Lev and touching his arm. "Everyone can contribute a little."

"Might work," he said, looking over at her. "But I don't think so. The blood is a symbol of sacrifice. We have to sacrifice something. I know we're relying on this death angel being irrational, but we don't want to push it too far."

"The dog," said Creed.

"No one touches the dog," said Rachel.

"Here, Wolfie," Zack whispered. The dachshund sprung into Zack's lap and buried its nose in the crook of his elbow.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair. "Maybe the ghosts surrounding us are all we have to fight right now," said the sheriff.

"But we have to fight whatever killed Ewell and Petty and the rest," said Dave.

"I mean," said the sheriff. "Right now."

Beatricia stirred in her chair, hooking the crooks of her canes onto the tabletop. "The two ghosts outside have multiplied," she said. Her eyes glazed over, as if she had fallen into trance. "I can sense four. Leveaux and Ruiz have joined Ewell and Petty. And all four are waiting. Crockett will join them, if he hasn't already."

"What are they waiting for, Beatricia?" said Dave, leaning forward.

"For Nuno Sievers." She closed her eyes. Silence fell around the table. Everyone ceased talking or coughing. Zack stopped scraping his chair.

"Don't do it, Mother," said Rachel. "Your heart."

"I'm an old lady," said Beatricia. "Besides, this one's easy. I don't need a séance, or cards, or a board. Just to shut my eyes and have a moment of quiet."

“No.”

“I’ve had a good life, Rachel,” she said. “Besides, this one is not going to kill me. Just give me thirty seconds.”

“No more than that, and if you go to sleep or look the slightest bit disturbed, I’m going to wake you.”

“Fine,” Beatricia said, eyes squeezed shut. Only the wind and the rain outside the dining room window made a sound, blowing at the glass with such force the panes rattled in their casings.

“Nuno Sievers is coming,” said Beatricia. “I can feel his power growing, but he’s moving slowly, very slowly. Still, he’s sending energy out to hold his sentinels in place. To keep us from leaving. We have an hour, maybe more. I can feel something else, too. Petty is still in the front yard, waiting. Leveaux is starting the tractor. Ruiz and Ewell are patrolling the north and west gardens. Deputy Crockett is standing in the yard to the east, not far from the porch.”

Her eyes opened.

Dave sprang from his chair and ran to look out the window. A long stroke of dagger lightning tore through the sky. Thirty feet from the porch, Crockett’s form had condensed back into existence and was standing in the rain, arms outstretched.

“Damn!” Dave shouted. Lev and the sheriff rushed to the door, Rachel and the boys close behind. Rachel turned to look at her mother. Beatricia opened her eyes, shut them again, and lapsed into sleep.

Rachel had never before seen Dave so angered by the sight of anything. Hanging in the wind and the rain, like a scarecrow, in his deputy’s jacket, Crockett seemed eerie, but serene, like a Zen master gone agreeably insane. By contrast, he seemed a reminder of everything that had gone wrong with Dave’s life—his conflicts with her and Zack; his overwork and frustrations with his businesses; his artistic endeavors that had never taken him as far as they should have; the fact that he could be such a whiner, a lump. Rachel saw that his accomplishments, his strength and intelligence, and even his modest wealth he built from scratch disappearing in an instant. All he saw before him, Rachel knew, was endless insult and threat. And she watched, unable to do anything about it, as he squeezed his fists shut until his knuckles turned white.

“Where’s Creed?” said Lev, glancing around the dining room. Leo looked under the table; Dave’s face flushed as he rocked forward and back in his chair, confused. Or was it rage?

Creed’s rifle was missing and the kitchen door was open. “He’s gone off to the stable,” said the sheriff.

Rachel removed her finger from her mouth, the snag of a nail now stuck uncomfortably between her two front teeth.



Creed moved through the darkness and blowing rain, a large plastic trash bag and twist ties stuffed into a pocket of his raincoat. He'd turned off the light in the kitchen before sneaking out the back door, down the porch steps. As he crept across the brick patio, he prayed, for the first time in years. He'd prayed no lightning would light up the sky. With luck, the moon would stay hidden behind the old trees he so loved, and no one from the house would point a flashlight. Everything depended on that. Before him, he remembered, a hedgerow loomed in the darkness. He crouched and inched ahead. When he reached the privet, he still blundered into them, stifling a gasp. He paused, listening for footsteps or the swish of ghosts. He imagined Ruiz and Ewell making their grisly patrol of back fields.

No sound but the rain—and now, the distant roar of a tractor. He felt the thrill of a mouse safely bypassing a cat, and looked to the sky, praying again there would be no shining light to give away his position. Then, he moved right, where the hedgerow ended and the first gate hung open. He thanked the clouds for sticking around.

But the moon and stars fluttered through the quilt of clouds, and he caught a glimpse of Ruiz's ghost fifty yards west in the middle of the north pasture and left of the barn. He smiled. Having often helped Dave and Rachel with their horses, he knew

it was possible to cut through a paddock that led to the right-hand side of the barn and then pass through the iron gate that led to the riding school, after which he would be able to enter the back of the barn, unseen, sneak past the horse stalls in darkness and grab a roosting chicken from a ledge.

He slipped through the gate of the round pen and felt for the drenched chain he would have to lift from its hook on the post. It took a minute to find it, as he cursed to himself, prayed to God, and finally fingered the cold links, shivering. He pushed the gate open and paused, listening. The tractor's far-off thunder muttered in his ears, but there came no footsteps or sibilant swoops, no screeching of a devil.

So the ghosts could be fooled, avoided, providing there was no light. He crouched, uncomfortable without his rifle, the rain sweeping toward him, stinging his face. Taking slow steps he crept through sucking mud and high grass to the second gate on the right side of the barn; if the Ruiz scarecrow were to spot him it would have to see through the dark as well as wooden planks. Then, his enemy, lightning, flashed.

He had arrived at the second gate not a step too early. He unfastened it more quickly than he had the first and hurried through the riding school, shielded by the long wall, coming at last to its Dutch door. He entered the barn and held a breath. There he paused again, listening. He crouched by instinct until his eyes could adjust to this particular depth of darkness. The scarecrow, evidently, had held its place, not thirty feet away, on the other side of the planking.

Through the door of the barn Creed saw the silhouette of the Sheltons' brick house. The lights in the kitchen were off. Good, he thought. Rachel could be a bitch but she was damn smart, knowing to keep the lights off so he could see to get back the way he had come.

The horses whinnied in their stalls. Were they alerting each other to danger? Maybe they could smell him. Perhaps they wanted food. Maybe the wind carried the scent of a mare, or an unholy creature. Dave had once told Creed that horses were sensitive to minute quivering of the earth, that even nearby rodents shook the ground enough to transmit vibrations through horses' hooves and up their legs. Which, in turn, transmitted to

their brains in the form of sound and made them tremble all over. It was natural he should think of that now. If the scarecrow should move closer, would the animals rear in their stalls?

Instead, they looked only wide-eyed and fitful. Perhaps the consistent drumming of the rain had a calming effect that damped down their misgivings. For a moment even Creed felt lulled, as if the barn were warm and he could lie down on the hay bales and drift to sleep. But the terror returned. He startled. There was something wrong here, in the barn. He smelled the acrid stench of burning flesh that had descended in a fog, perhaps emanating from the ghost of Ruiz.

He bounded like a cat, quick and silent, to the chicken coup, which consisted of an empty horse stall faced with wire to keep out foxes and weasels. There he found the sleeping birds, snuggling into the warmth of their neighbor. It would be a shame to kill two or three. The Sheltons kept Auracanas, the Easter egg layers, and silkies, fuzzy chickens used less for produce than for pets. They made excellent mothers and could be trusted to hatch out other artisan breeds. Creed hesitated, then steeled himself. The silkies, in their straw, seemed like half-hidden kittens of blue and beige down.

Unlike other chickens, they were used to being handled and could be counted on not to squawk. He felt for a moment like he was in charge of a firing squad.

Creed took out his paper sack, put in two of the silkies and closed off the bag with a twist tie. He began to trace his steps, but stopped. The smell of cinders grew stronger, putrid as the flesh of a spoiled, half-smoked ham. Above the Dutch door at the front of the barn, the shape of Ruiz under a stray beam cast by the rising moon was melting into the darkness of the early night, hands ablaze.

Creed froze, not fluttering an eyelash, mind a whirl of calculation. He'd been in much worse positions, professionally. The ghost had weaknesses, he knew. For one, it was stupid. Secondly, it must've been posted there to keep watch on the kitchen door, not on the barn. Further, even if it turned around, it might not see him, considering the absence of any light source other than that coming from its hands. It was important not to make a sound. Lucky the chickens in Creed's bag were quiet fowl.

Creed took a single soft step in the direction of a horse stall that he knew was empty. He needed to overcome only five obstacles to make it back to the kitchen. Mr. Petty would be guarding the front of the house, Crockett stationed near the side porch to the east, Mr. Ewell still in the north pasture beside the barn, and Deputy Leveaux still busy revving the motor of the Ford 8-N. As for Deputy Ruiz, with hands afire, she was probably a rover.

Creed took another step in utter blackness, and then another. Thanks to the noise of the rain, the sound of the stall door creaking as it opened and closed was probably muffled. Creed crouched behind the half door, the bag of silkies in his arms.

He was learning a lot about automatons, at least these particular creatures. They had limited vision and hearing, which probably meant they weren't bloodhounds, either, when it came to their sense of smell.

He set the bag of silkies on the straw beside him, trying to ignore the stirrings of the horses that had wandered into their stalls to get out of the weather. Some began to whinny—at a mouse, at the rustlings of leaves or some other imaginary intrusion. Slivovitz kicked at a wall. Creed pulled the folding knife out of the belt-pouch of his soaked jeans. He opened the blade, listening, sniffing the wet air for ashes. The sound of shuffling steps reached his ears. Probably Ruiz drifting down the line of stalls.

Creed cut his left wrist. When his inner arm was awash with blood, he wiped it across the top of the stall door.



After she turned the lights off, Rachel allowed Sheriff Wise to shoo her and everyone else but Dave out of the kitchen.

“I’ll stay here and watch for Creed,” Dave said.

Rachel dragged her ass into the dining room. She was tired, her mother’s heart was all but spent, and Lev needed help. He was her greatest hope. The boys her greatest worry. Lest she forget: Nuno Sievers was after them primarily. The boys had barely caught sight of Deputy Crockett’s specter, but what they told Rachel snapped her into a new appreciation of the occasion’s horror and solemnity. Being the eldest, Zack had seen the likeness of Crockett with what had seemed the most accurate of eyes—as a pure-white scarecrow in its ungainly pose. Leo had seen it as if in a fun-house mirror. To him, Petty had been a stick figure with a massive white head, as big as a beach ball and flashing shark teeth of gleaming white.

“Are you all right?” Rachel said to Leo as she retied her ankle boots at the dining room table. Her youngest ran to her as quickly as he could, straight to her arms, but instead of throwing himself into her embrace, he pulled up short as if to maintain his dignity.

Wolfie was whimpering at the pantry door.

She ignored the dog’s dismay, and held her breath as Zack

put on a cloak of bravado and went again to the porch door to stare through its dripping panes.

“Nothing there now,” said Zack, “Just darkness, coagulating.”

Like blood, Rachel thought. *My boy is growing up, and good with words.*

Zack went to the head of the table and firmly plopped down in Dave’s vacated chair. “Mr. Nelson and Isabel have nothing to do with this,” Zack said to his mother. “I don’t think there is very much of Mr. Nelson left.”

“But...” Rachel began.

Beatricia, slumped in the chair beside Rachel, put a hand on her daughter’s arm. “There’s only Isabel,” she said. “Mr. Nelson died when the old Zebulon tavern burned. He deposited his chaotic energy and here it magnified.”

Zack nodded.

“Isabel died much later in some other place and followed the light into the closet, which happens to be a portal,” continued Beatricia. “There, she found Mr. Nelson’s animal magnetism and gathered it. When you moved into the house, Zack, she had a reason to stay.”

“How do you know, Mother?” Rachel’s hand tightened on Beatricia’s arm as if it were a coupling that could maintain a link through the most humbling darkness.

Beatricia smiled. In the past, Rachel would only ask how she knew something because she doubted her mother’s word. Things were different now. Her voice was soft, but insistent. She wanted and needed the knowledge.

“How do I know anything?” Beatricia said, her face aglow, but exhausted, as if she had traveled too far, too long.

“I’d like to know why Isabel stopped here,” said Rachel.

“Ask Zack.” Beatricia looked into Rachel’s staring eyes, then glanced toward her grandson.

Rachel said. “I want you to tell me if Grandma is right.”

“I think so.” He looked down at his folded hands on the table.

“So tell me why Isabel stayed here, in the closet on the landing.”

“Because she loves me.”

Rachel felt faint. A host of questions ran through her mind. What was the meaning of the giggles and whispers on the

stairway? How far had he gone with a ghost? Had they held hands? Kissed? Gone further than that?

“How solid, how real is she?” Rachel asked.

“Just like you and me.” He kept his back straight at the head of the table, like Dave sat. “When she wants to be.”

Rachel was stunned. “Are you telling me the truth, Zack?”

“Yes. I love her.”

“Then you have to let her go, because she needs to be somewhere else.”

“No.”

“You must.”

“But why?” Tears grew like pearls, trapped in his black eyelashes. “We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“That’s not the problem.”

“You said love was never wrong!” He pounded both his fists once on the table.

Wolfie whimpered. Leo sat down on the green velveteen dog bed and rubbed the animal’s belly.

Zack sunk into silence, staring into the polished mahogany finish of the table, mesmerized, as if an image of Isabel were reflected from its thin veneer of wax.

“Leave it alone, Zack. You don’t know what she is,” said Rachel.

“No! *You* don’t know! I know Isabel inside and out.”

“Rachel,” said Beatrice, cutting in, gently thumping the floor with a cane. “Isabel is a beneficent spirit.”

She rounded on her mother. “How do you know?”

“That’s the question. How do I know and why don’t you?” Beatrice cracked her neck and rolled it around. “Pay closer attention, Rachel. Isabel is good and loyal to Zack. You feel that as well as I. As well as Zack does.”

Leo was playing tug of war with Wolfie, with a blue and white chew toy that once resembled a raccoon.

“Mom, Isabel is nice,” Zack said. “Sometimes she helps me with my math homework.”

Rachel’s cheeks filled with blood. She was jealous. Simple as that. Why hadn’t she seen it? She felt the nape of her neck grow warm and a surge of heat pass from her hand to her mother’s arm. Zack was a magnificent, talented boy. She loved to touch

his brown face and stare into his dark, beautiful eyes. There was a tug of war going on, between her and Isabel. The once strange entropy that ruled the closet on the landing now seemed less chaotic. Spare saddles and bridles hung askew from racks and hooks. Sometimes she'd find saddles sprawled on the floor. Once she'd found a tack trunk standing on its side, way too heavy for the boys to have lifted. Had Isabel used her animal magnetism, the law of ghosts, to place it as a barrier? Was the little room on the landing a love bower built by Isabel and Zack as their connubial home?

What Beatricia implied was true. Rachel did know, deep down, that Isabel was Zack's loved one, not an enemy. She also knew there was a good reason she would get headaches when the door creaked open, seemingly of its own accord. She wanted Zack exclusively for herself. Her eyes burned with shame.

Where was Creed? He should be back. Dave was pacing in the kitchen. When he passed by the open doorway, she could see him wringing his hands.

Now that the talking had stopped, the only sounds were the whisperings of the wind, the hammering of the rain, and a clunk from the landing on the stairs. Zack sat bolt upright.

"You stay right there, young man," Rachel said. "Isabel is one thing. We're trying to deal with another ghost that is trying to kill us. Probably all of us."

Zack leapt from the table and ran toward the stairs. "Isabel!"

"No, Zack," said Rachel, standing, letting her mother's arm go. "Please. I'm sorry. She'll be all right for now. We need you here. We have to stay together."

At once, the clock that couldn't tell time began chiming. Zack stopped in the foyer, looking back at it. "Mom, the clock's moved itself."

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"But Mom—it's in the foyer again."

Rachel was unimpressed. Compared to the dead coming back to life, the clock walking around the house was nothing now. "Come back to the table, Zack. We need to make a plan."

Zack returned to the dining room, face flushed and forehead sweating. He sat back down in Dave's chair. Beatricia leaned over and put a calming hand on his shoulder.

Sitting back down, Rachel gazed at Zack. His chin was stubbled, slightly. He was becoming a man. She was a liberated mother. Once she'd sent Zack a copy of *Playboy Magazine*, return address from a wayward uncle she rarely saw, a bartender on a cruise ship. She felt another wave of jealousy and brushed it off.

Zack touched her hand. "I love her, Mom."

She couldn't think of anything to say. The only sound in the room was the snapping of wood burning in the stove.

"Let's drop it for now," said Lev, "please." He turned to Zack. "We have more important things to talk about."

"Our next step, for instance," acknowledged Rachel.

Leo's eyes widened with fright. She pulled him into her lap, where he squirmed and asked, "Where's dad?"

"We should talk about the Seder," said Lev. "It's more than just a simple dinner." Zack snorted.

"That snort is a family trait," Beatrice explained.

Lev shifted his frown from Zack to the window of the woodstove that draped the walls of the dining room in warm robes of gold. Softly, yet urgently, he spoke of the Seders of his childhood... the perfect preparation of the food... his family gathered round... the Haggadic readings... the empty seat in the best chair for the Prophet Elijah ...the small ornamental pillow at the left arm of the Seder leader's chair...the white linens... his father's permanent frown...his mother's coral lipstick. His mother, progressive as she was, always left a cup for Miriam on the right hand of Elijah's, and the front door to the house open to welcome the prophet.

Lev closed and clenched his fists. "But I can't remember how to do it." He leaned his cheeks on his knuckles in search of more detailed memories. "I can't remember the order."

"Just do the best you can, Lev," said Dave, standing. "Maybe we should clean some more, wipe down the pipes under the sink."

"I really think the house is clean enough," said Lev. "Let's make the meal." He slid a King James across the dented mahogany dining table to Beatrice. She caught it with a slap.

"Grandma won't be able to read that without her old-lady reading glasses." Leo flung open one of the Tansu's junk drawers.

He dug elbow deep and pulled out a pair of drugstore spectacles he found under a stack of old bridge toll tickets stapled together. He spat on the lenses and wiped them off on the hem of his Metallica T-shirt.

He walked over to Beatrice and set the grape-colored spectacles on her nose, then kissed her cheek and smiled.

“That’s perfect,” she said, opening her Bible. She cleared her throat and squinted over the top of the glasses. “Now these are the names of the children of Israel, who came into Egypt; every man and his household came with Jacob.”

“Who’s going to help Lev and I make the Seder?” Rachel said, feeling like the little red hen.

Beatrice continued reading verses of Exodus.

Zack and Leo said nothing, only exchanged glances and shrugs, which lead to punches and giggles.

“Be serious.” Rachel shook her head. “You two will help whether you want to or not.”

“Stop guilt-tripping us,” said Zack, inflating his chest, pushing his voice into a lower range. “Of course we’ll help.”

“I’ll set the table,” offered Leo, slugging his brother’s shoulder as scooted past, out of reach, into the kitchen.

“Good, Leo,” said Rachel. “You can help me cut the vegetables, Zack. I have some really sharp new knives. You’ll have to be careful with them.”

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Crouched in the darkness of an empty stall, Creed had the sudden notion that he was probably the only person who’d ever be stalked in a barn by a ghost who would be able to evaporate him. The smell of ashes grew more intense. He could hear the whoosh of the spook as it turned and headed down the central aisle, jiggling latches. Creed almost laughed. He stifled himself. This was a dangerous game.

Another door opened and closed. One of the horses whinnied and stomped a foot. Creed held his breath, kneeling behind the blood-smeared door. The moments dragged on. Soon, there would be an explosion of air from his lungs. He released the tension in his body, with concentration, and let the breath go, slowly, not making a sound, and then peered through a crack.

Nothing, only darkness.

Then something. In the black of the barn, he saw Ruiz's blazing hands push a door closed, and move toward him down the aisle, sailing like two slow-moving birds on fire.

The stall doors opened and shut one after the other, the horses snorting and stomping. One stall to go. Creed pulled his door tight so there was no crack and listened to the dull thud of striking wood—Slivovitz kicking the door of his stall. The flaming hands of Ruiz cast a red glowing bowl on the stable's ceiling.

Creed recalled a song he'd learned in childhood. There is power, power, power. *Wondrous working power*. In the blood of the lamb.

He didn't feel like a fucking lamb.

But Ruiz passed his door without pausing, without touching it.

Creed swore to himself that now he would go to church. Or to a gun show—whichever came first. Ruiz finished her survey of the stalls and floated out the back door. The smell of ashes, which had hung heavily over the hay mangers with alfalfa spilling out of them, was gone, leaving behind only the pleasant thick aroma of horses and pine shavings blended with the freshness of rain.

The blood had worked. It'd actually worked. Maybe cleansing the house of *chametz* had helped. No telling.

Creed stood. No ghost in the aisle now, only darkness. He imagined Ruiz circling around the stable, drifting toward the round pen and dressage arena as a vaporous spirit, her glowing hands like the eyes of night. Creed spat in contempt. It was good to breathe freely again, to stretch and move. He felt his way in the dark to the stall at the front end of the stable and flung open the door, then scuttled as quickly as he could down the aisle and threw open every door. In the last stall Queen Mary was waiting, Creed hoped, ready to run.

She whinnied and cantered down the aisle into the windblown night rain now falling in sheets that blanketed the stars and obscured the moon. The other horses followed. At the stable door, they broke west and turned to the north pasture, flaming hands following—too slowly to catch them.

Laughter bubbling from his chest, Creed lowered his head in the rain and ran like hell for the lights of the house.



The men stood in shadows of the kitchen, Dave at the back door and the sheriff looking through the window over the sink. Rachel steadied a pan hanging from a rack over the butcher block, wondering why it had been swinging, then took it down. Passages from Exodus floated through the open doorway connecting the kitchen to the dining room, interrupting the hum of the refrigerator, the dripping of the faucets, the gurgling struggles of the water pump.

“Creed should’ve been back already.” Hunched in a stream of moonlight escaping from the umbrella of clouds, Dave rubbed his eyes, then pressed his forehead against the glass.

“Ain’t necessarily so.” Wise whispered. “He might be lookin’ to sneak back. Could take some time.”

“Make room,” said Rachel. “We have to cook.” She turned to Leo. “Go get some white candles out of the tansu, left side, up high, behind the tablecloths. And see if you can find the plain linen runner. We might need it.”

When he scurried into the dining room to get the candles, his drumsticks fell out of his socks. Lev excused himself for bumping into Rachel and the sheriff, then leaned over Wise’s hump of a shoulder to pull open the eyelet café curtains at the kitchen window.

“We need the *shedim* out there to see that we’re doing our

damndest to make a Seder meal," he said.

Rachel half-opened the refrigerator door, panicked at the light, then pressed the button to turn it off. She felt around the bottom shelf where the short items usually were and jerked out a package of half-eaten, dried-out corn tortillas.

"Those will do." Lev took one out of the torn package and ate a piece. "No *chametz*."

Using the blue glow from her cell phone, Rachel rummaged through the crisper and retrieved a head of lettuce and a droopy cucumber, its skin beginning to shrivel.

"Appetizing," said Zack. "That cuke's seen better days."

"It'll have to do." Lev grabbed a potato from behind a big sack of Granny Smiths. "Oh! Cocktail sauce. Has horseradish in it. *Maror*."

"Been in there for months, maybe years," said Zack. "The only person who ever ate that was Great Aunt Sylvia. She died last summer."

"We'll have to eat it anyway." Lev laid the half-empty jar of Emeril's Red Hot Shrimp Sauce, a Yukon Gold potato, the lettuce, two apples, a sad bunch of limp parsley, and a dozen eggs on the quartzite counter. "Twice."

"Zack, we got it handled here." Rachel slipped her cell phone into one pocket, jerked her finger off the refrigerator button, spun, and leaned against the door, shutting it quietly. "Would you open the drapes in the dining room?"

"Why? Those dudes are scary. Like flesh-eating zombies." Zack's forehead tightened, accentuating his widow's peak.

"Just do it," said Dave.

Rachel hugged Zack, pressing her nose into his salty neck, then let him go.

He crossed into the dining room, where Leo was standing on a stool collecting white candles from the tansu. She watched her oldest hurry to the window and tug at the heavy crimson brocade panels.

Footsteps sounded up the steps and across the patio of the back porch toward the kitchen.

"Creed's come back." Dave lunged for the latch and turned it counterclockwise, using his body weight for leverage. He opened the door and a blast of wind and rain swept into the

kitchen, dropping Creed inside.

Wise knocked over a saucepan that clattered to the pine floor as if to announce the arrival of a prodigal son. Creed was soaked; a sheen of wet triumph lit his face. He laughed, settling the rustling sack of chickens on the maple butcher block, which rocked on uneven legs.

“You made it. You little devil,” said Wise. Rachel flipped on the pendant lamps.

Dave slammed the kitchen door and forced the stubborn lock shut again.

“Hot damn, Creed.” Wise slapped his leg. “You’re some kind of a man, you are. Balls the size of a hog’s!”

“I had to let the horses out of their stalls as a distraction.” Creed slipped out of his wet coat and hung it on an iron peg on the back of the door. “Those damned spooks are out there stampeding them all over the north pasture. Can’t catch ’em either.”

“The horses won’t go far,” said Rachel.

“Did you get the chickens?” the sheriff said.

“Got the chickens in the bag,” said Creed.

“Oh, no,” said Leo, running in from the dining room carrying a white tablecloth. Three candles settled into a sling made by the fabric draped between his arms. “Not our chickens!”

“*What,*” called Zack from the dining room, still wrestling with the heavy cotton drapery. Leo poked his head into the bag. Tears filled his eyes as he crumpled to his knees. “You can’t kill Fluffy and Powderpuff. They’re tame. Nicer than people.”

Rachel knelt and collected Leo in her arms.

“We have to,” said Dave.

He sobbed. “Why, Dad?”

“We need blood for the doorways,” Dave said.

“Nobody is gonna kill our chickens,” yelled Zack from the dining room.

Lev took the quivering plastic bag from the butcher block and put it in the sink. A cry of despair escaped Leo’s lips.

“Just calm down, Leo,” said Dave. “Leave the chickens there.”

“We’ve got to set the table for the Seder,” said Lev.

Rachel sighed. This is hell day. She imagined Lev’s childhood

Seders had been as convivial as Chanukah, blessed with joyful children and solemn elders with their peaceful benedictions. Tears of children were inconsistent with a Seder, therefore dangerous to its effect. What ghosts would be fooled? *None*, she thought. *Absolutely none*.

“Let’s go into the dining room,” Dave said, attempting to distract Leo. “Everyone should help with the plates.”

Rachel turned and looked through the doorway. Zack was unwinding a tangle at the top of a traverse rod while perched on a radiator.

“Zack. Get down from there!” said Rachel.

“You told me to open the curtains. Now they’re stuck.”

“Just use the banana tiebacks,” said Dave.

“Get down before you break your neck,” said Rachel.

Leo wailed again. “Not my chickens!”

Dave picked him up and carried him into the dining room. He set him in front of a quadrangle of old Greek trivets of butterflies from Rhodes.

“Now listen to me.” He let Leo climb out of his sagging arms. “This is a very, very serious situation. You’ve got to help us. Everything depends on our family working together. We can’t have tears or frowns or talking back.”

“Leo,” said Lev, snapping his fingers and pointing to the hutch. “Get me the biggest bowl and biggest pitcher you can find.”

Leo stomped to the kitchen. After the crashing of stainless steel against cast iron, he went back into the dining room with a pitcher and a bowl.

Zack looked down from his post on the radiator at Dave. “Now you’re telling us we can’t frown?”

“Yes. And I’ll tell you why,” said Dave. “Turn around and squat, and take a good look out that window.”

Zack climbed down onto the oak floor, planted both elbows on the sill and took a good long look. Rachel stroked his back. She felt her face go taut, as if paralyzed with curare. Where there had been two flames hovering over the front lawn, there were now four. Like the tips of lit matchsticks, they were themselves luminous, but illuminated nothing.

“Holy...holy fuck.” Zack’s eyes grew wet and red.

“Leo,” said Lev. “Put water in that pitcher. Come on, I’ll help you.”

“Here,” said Rachel. “Help me with these.” She handed Zack a stack of dishes. He set the plates at the table, head low, saying nothing else.

Sheriff Wise carried nine goblets and set them to the right of each place. Creed brought out four bottles of Covenant Cabernet 2005. Leo carried out a full pitcher of water, Lev behind him with a bowl the size of a turkey platter.

“We really need all this wine?” said the sheriff.

“We each need to drink four glasses during the meal,” said Lev, “even the children.”

Beatricia looked up from her crinkly old black-leather bound Bible. Letting her readers slide down the tip of her hooked nose, she looked over the top of the purple rim. “At least we’ll be drunk.”

“We might as well tie one on, like old times.” Wise snickered. “Remember those Canasta nights with the Daughters of the American Revolution?”

“We can’t eat off those plates,” interrupted Beatricia.

“Why not?” said Rachel.

“She’s right,” said Lev. “Got any paper ones?”

“Paper plates?” Rachel threw her hands in the air. “But—”

“We’ve got some leftover from the Fourth of July picnic,” said Zack. “I know where they are.” He stepped over Wolfie who was scrunched into a little caramel ball on his pillow in the pantry, like a giant canine Milk Dud. “Good boy, Wolfie. You’ll be all right.” Scrounging around in the pantry, Zack scraped walls like a rat.

Rachel cringed at the sound of crinkly wrapping paper and cardboard boxes filled with old tax forms falling off shelves.

“Zack,” she said. “Have you got them?”

“Yeah, Mom.” He tripped over Wolfie, who yipped, then bent down and patted the dog’s head. He handed the paper plates to Lev.

Lev walked around the table and placed one plate on each drabware setting. “Look, nothing we’re doing here is the way I remember it. But just because it isn’t right, doesn’t mean it won’t work. The dishes have been used for non-kosher foods.

I'm putting new paper plates on top so the food doesn't touch them. I don't know about these glasses and I don't know about this wine. But we're doing the best we can. Maybe we'll have some kind of divine intervention."

Beatricia took off her glasses and set them on the table next to her book. "That's our plan." She closed her eyes and pressed her palms together in the praying position, then took several deep breaths.

"Dear ones, may the spirits on the other side guide us to do this ritual well enough to satisfy the dybbuk. And may the ghost be freed from his burning pain and be guided to the light which will emancipate him." She sat a moment, mumbling prayers, then opened her eyes. "Well, back to Exodus." She returned the glasses to her nose and read in a different voice, as if she were inhabited by various beings for different tasks.

Rachel ushered each person to his place while Lev poured wine.

Beatricia intoned like a holy roller: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night and will smite the first born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord."

"What about the horses?" Zack said. "They're all boys. Except Queen Maria. What if they're first born, too?"

Dave opened his mouth, but no words came out. Lev held his silence.

Creed lifted his arm, showing the soft side of his wrist. "I smeared blood on all the stall doors. When they go back into their stalls, they'll be alright."

"I'm not worried about the horses...they have ways." Rachel turned to Creed. "George. Did you think of that when you smeared the blood, or are you just lucky?" She looked down at her paper plate. "No matter. Don't answer. Lucky is good."

"To be wise is lucky," said Lev, looking at Creed.

"To be brave is lucky, sometimes," said the sherriff.

"And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you." Beatricia sighed. "I think that's about the crux of it."

Leo had a fork in one hand and a knife in the other as he

drum-rolled the edge of the table.

“Stop that.” Rachel plugged her ears and sank back into the chair. “We don’t know what we’re doing. Should we have the Seder meal first or paint the doors with blood?”

Leo threw down the utensils and buried his head in his arms. The knife and fork bounced off the table and onto the floor, taking a hard-boiled egg with them. Wolfie scurried to scarf it down.

“We should put the blood up first,” said the sheriff. “That’s our best protection. It helped Creed out there. It’ll help us.”

“Look,” said Lev, “I’m not an observant Jew, but I do know that no one has done that for a thousand years. The larger point is to have a meaningful ceremony.”

“We need the blood,” Dave said. “I don’t think I can relax enough to eat before it’s done.

I might throw up.”

“Me, too,” said Rachel. “I can’t take it.”

“Nonsense!” Beatrice slapped the Bible shut. “Nuno Sievers left his cellar but he’s not strong enough to fly all the way here. I can feel him resting in a tree top, gathering energy. We have plenty of time. Let’s do it right.”

“We’re doing our best,” said Dave.

“Okay,” said the sheriff. “I obviously don’t know what the hell to do. I’m a Methodist. But I’ll tell you this. We should probably go with Lev. He’s the one who knows, at least a little bit.”

Lev shook his head. “No, I don’t. Not really.”

“Let’s have a vote,” said Rachel.

“Wait a minute,” said Dave. “This is not a democratic issue. It’s a spiritual issue.”

“Let me make something clear.” Lev frowned, his scar crinkling. “I haven’t been to a Seder since I was ten. At temple I flirted with girls and read comic books. I never had a Bar Mitzvah. Now, I’m dating a Catholic.”

“But you’re still a Jew.” Creed cleaned his fingernails with his pocketknife and looked up. “Ethnically, I mean.”

“Stop arguing, all of you.” Rachel said. “Go wash your hands. Everyone.”

“They’re washed,” said Dave.

“Yeah, but...” Lev shook his head and sighed. “You gotta do

it again. We walk to the bowl at the end of the table. One by one. Pour water on the right hand first, then the left. Let's do it."

He walked across the dining room and drummed his fingers on the top of the two boys' heads, his signal for them to copy him.

Lev dribbled water three times on each hand held over the bowl. "And don't say any prayers while you're rinsing."

"Don't worry, I won't," said Zack.

"Me neither," said Leo.

When it was Leo's turn, Lev helped him lift the pitcher. "One, two, three," he said. "Now give me your left hand."

Everyone else circled to the end of the table. "Thank God you're Jewish," said Creed.

"I'm not." Lev shook his head. "So drop it."

"Don't say that at the table," said Rachel, holding a finger to her lips. "They can hear you."

"How do you know?" said Lev, whispering.

"I don't really know how," said Rachel. "But I do."

"Now you sound like your mother," said Dave.

She squirmed in her chair and eyed the scalloped edge of her paper plate. She was beginning to sound like Beatrice. She tilted her head toward the door. "I hear a pulsing of primordial, gelatinous grunts. They're smoky green. Trying to squeeze through the astragals of the house. But they're turning into balls. Bouncing off the doors and getting stuck in the grass."

"That's pretty far out, Rachel." Dave rolled his eyes.

"Yep. It's way out west." She glanced at her mother.

"You're doing well, Rachel." Beatrice nodded. "Far out or not."

"Isabel says this is the weirdest thing that's ever happened to her in her whole death," said Zack.

"Don't be a smart-ass." Dave snapped.

Zack shook his head and glared down at the beet salad.

Leo cocked his head, eyes boring straight into his father's. "If you could talk to Isabel like Zack can, Dad, then you wouldn't be yelling."

"I'm not yelling," Dave lowered his voice.

"Yes, you are." Leo picked up his knife and fork off the floor, wiped them on his jeans, and played another drum roll.

Rachel glanced over at Dave, whose head was lowered. She felt a vague backwater of guilt slosh over her. She was enjoying Leo's backtalk on some level. She liked him defending his brother.

"Isabel is telling me too, Zack," said Rachel. "She's whispering it." Rachel felt her face flush, first with triumph, then with the heat of fear rising in her cheeks.

A noise of bleating, like goats or sheep, emanated from the four cardinal points outside the house where the flaming specters stood their watch.

"Did you hear that?" Wise laced his fingers together into a church steeple.

"Yes," said everyone in unison.

"What's next, Lev?" Wise tugged on the cuffs of his shirt, as if he were cold and trying to cover his hands. He looked at his watch.

"Well, take it with a grain of salt." Lev shrugged. "I feel like a full-blown lunatic. This is a faux Seder, one that may or may not fool Nuno Sievers."

Rachel was tired of Lev's modest disclaimers. "Let's get on with it."

"Sievers is nuts," Dave said. "With no direction, except to come here and exact vengeance—or so we think."

"Tortured," said Rachel. "His soul's fragmented."

"Now you understand," Beatrice said. "I believe he's a tempest. I say he'll be fooled, and I also say he's not ready to blow his way here yet. I say we should have the meal."

"I say we should control what comes out of our mouths," said Rachel, wondering if ghosts could hear mind chatter. "A thought will kindle a flame."

A moment of silence. Then Zack, who had been resting his forehead on the paper plate, looked up, tears in his eyes.

"Isabel says we should take a vote." Zack pressed the palms of his hands against his eyebrows. "I don't need to be here. I want to be with Isabel. Forever."

Rachel felt tears burning the back of her eyes. "Isabel's dead. You can't do anything about that. She wants you to live."

He turned his damp face toward Rachel. His grief came rushing at her like a train.

She touched his cheek with the back of one hand. "She needs

you to live. That's why she told you to leave the house."

Zack looked toward the staircase. "But—I miss her."

Beatricia patted his shoulder. "Let's vote now."

"Okay," said Rachel. The end might be hurling itself toward their home, an uncontrollable meteor. But maybe Nuno would lose power instead of gaining it. "Let's vote. All those who think we should bloody the doors first, raise your hand."

Only Rachel and Dave lifted a palm. The boys shook their heads in disapproval. "Don't kill Fluffy and Powderpuff," Leo said with a sob.

"Leo's right," said Zack. "Can't we just use beet juice?"

"This is not a democracy," repeated Dave.

"And not a vegetarian ghost," quipped Creed.

"Mean," said Leo, under his breath.

"All those who want to eat the Seder meal first," Rachel paused, "tell me now."

Beatricia, Lev, and the sheriff raised their hands. Both boys flung their hands up, but Rachel counted over them.

"Three votes for eating the Seder meal first and two for spreading the blood, now," said Rachel, eyeing Creed. "George Creed, I insist you vote."

"I vote let's eat," said Creed. "I'm hungry. I've eaten under worse conditions."

"Worse conditions?" said Rachel. "Really? And what would those be?" She shook her head. "Forget it, George."

"And forget the chickens," Creed said. "We can use my blood. I smeared it on the stall doors. It worked."

There was a chorus of "yeses" from the boys.

"Well," said the sheriff, folding his hands behind his head, "I guess blood is blood."

"Blood is blood," said Rachel. "Sacrifice or not."

Rachel's mind was overactive, racing through scenarios. But the burden seemed to fall on Lev full force. He was worn out. The scar at the corner of his lip got deeper. He began scratching out words on loose leaf in red pen, squinting, face pinched, like he was exhausted by all this need to remember. She studied him and thought of the human disasters, like this one, in the name of religion. Only when she unfolded her napkin and put it on her lap did she realize her hands were shaking.



Rachel, willing her tremor away, struck a match and lit the five wicks in the dented silver candelabra that stood between the Seder plate and a glass of wine for Elijah. She leaned over Beatrice's scraped-up captain's chair and balanced the match on the edge of a saucer.

Her mother flipped open the Bible to a dog-eared page, highlighted yellow, and pushed it out to a perfect presbyopic reading distance.

"For the Prophet Elijah!" Lev repositioned a filled goblet on the white cloth, pressing so hard he made the table's legs squeak. "Open the door to let his spirit in."

"No," said Dave.

"Bad idea," said Creed.

"You'll let in the wrong spirit," said Rachel, nodding.

"Isabel says to keep the door shut," said Zack as if listening to distant whispers.

Leo picked up his silverware and played a flam tap on the table's edge.

"Leo!" said Rachel. She glared first at his utensil-bearing hands, then into his iron-skillet pupils.

"According to legend," Lev said, raising his glass in salutation. "Elijah takes a drop of wine from every Seder, then bottles it for the poor. The cup of Elijah, the promise of a messiah."

“You remember a lot,” said Wise, clinking his goblet with Lev’s.

“Not really.” His voice was flat. Rachel noticed one eyelid was twitching.

The bleating outside resumed from every direction. Like a band of sheep. What wonder of nature was causing the cries? Why not meowing, humming, purring, or growling? A bleat was the sound a goat or sheep made due to its unique vocal cord anatomy. These ghosts, golems, scarecrows, whatever they were, seemed to have human anatomy, or at least shadows of it. Where did the endless bleating come from?

Beatricia nodded to her son-in-law. “And you shall tell it to your son that day, saying, ‘Because of this, God did for us, when He took me out of Egypt.’”

Fingering the top of his wine glass, Dave was slouched at one end of the table. “I feel ridiculous.”

“Time for wine,” Creed said.

Rachel blocked her mind from the sounds surrounding the house just like she’d blocked her hand tremor. She shut her eyes and saw the green balls outside again, like tiny planets of fireflies. Flattening, deflating, and quivering in the grass like eggs about to hatch.

“I believe...I believe...I believe,” she said under her breath. She pinched her own thigh to see if she was truly awake. She looked at Dave and felt the edges of her lips turn up as she thought of Socrates. “I believe... I believe... I believe,” she whispered to herself as her mind flashed to the Cowardly Lion, who, unlike her, was trying to believe a negative: “There’s no such thing as ghosts! There’s no such thing as ghosts!” That was one stupid lion.

Lev handed Dave the sheet of paper, notes scratched out in red ink. He squinted and cocked his head, deciphering the scrawl. “Uhhh... welcome to our Seder.”

Rachel squeezed her eyes to shut out thoughts about green eggs and their hatchlings. “We were slaves in Egypt.” Dave faltered, took a sip of wine and read on.

Rachel stared through the window at the empty house across Burnt Chestnut, eyes scanning the lawn for the illuminated hands of specters that seemed to have vanished. Did the pouring

of the wine have something to do with their disappearance? Or perhaps it was the fumes of the grapes released into the air in the decanting. But what about Nuno? She searched the branches of the crape myrtles at the road's edge for any newly arrived dark form distinct from scarecrows or little green spheres. But she didn't see one. Not yet.

Dave cleared his throat, lifted his glass, and nodded at Rachel. "But now we're free."

Lev cleared his throat, pressing his thumbs into his temples. "What are the four kinds of children, Dave? It's on your paper."

Dave flattened the paper out on a small, unoccupied spot on the table and dabbed with his napkin at a dribble of wine that had stained the page. "The wise child, the silent child, the wicked child, and the simple child."

"How do we deal with those children?" Lev's eyelids had the loose, wet look of a tired animal's.

Dave glanced at Zack, then at Leo, who seemed to be monitoring the time it took to answer. "I have no idea." The lines on his forehead grew deeper.

Lev raised his glass. "First, drink more wine. Blessed are you, Lord our God. Ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine."

Everyone raised his glass and took a swallow. Leo made a face.

Dave looked at the clock, then at Lev. "Do I need to come up with answers to these questions, Lev?" asked Dave, eyes red and dry. He looked back at the clock.

"You don't have to come up with anything. They're on your paper." The room around Rachel seemed to be growing pale.

"To the wise child, explain Passover." Lev looked straight at Zack and selected a stalk of celery. "We dip this *karpas* in saltwater because our tears taste salty. Our people cried in Egypt when we were slaves."

"To the silent child," said Dave, drumming fingers on the arm of his chair, "explain Passover loudly."

"To the simple child," said Lev, pointing to himself, "explain Passover slowly."

Dave dropped the paper. It fell to the floor like a leaf, carried by the draw of the wood stove. "I, uh, can't do the next one."

Zack rose and picked up the Four Minute Haggadah. He placed it on the table before Dave, then set the wine glass on it like a paperweight.

Lev coughed. "To the wicked child...show him your evil eye and intimidate him in front of the relatives. Dave, keep reading."

"Blessed are you," recited Dave. "Lord our God, ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the earth."

Lev lifted the white cloth from the matzoh plate. "We take half of the middle matzoh to be the *afikomen*, which means dessert."

"That's Greek, children." Beatricia emptied the second bottle into her glass, keeping a pinky extended. She held the wine up to the candelabra, swirling the ruby liquid in the dim candlelight.

Rachel frowned as her mother sniffed the cabernet. Oh well. Perhaps Beatricia's "grand etiquette" would help. There were, after all, scarecrows with flaming palms circling their home intermittently.

"We'll hide half the *afikomen*, eat the rest, and say a blessing," said Lev. "Matzoh represents the suffering of our people when they were slaves."

Rachel turned to be sure her children had food in their mouths, then put a matzoh in hers. "Now we ask four ceremonial questions," said Lev. "But I don't remember what they are and I don't remember the answers."

"Just pretend," she suggested.

"All right," said Dave, glancing at the window. "I'll ask the questions." He cleared his throat. "Why are we doing this?"

"To save our lives, Dave?" said Rachel.

He shrugged. "That might not be the answer."

"Let's hope those things out there don't care," said Rachel. "Listen, if we're going to do this, let's say something smart." She lowered her head for a moment. "To give thanks for God leading us to freedom." She looked at Dave. His pupils reflected the bowl of purple cabbage in front of him.

Purple. A holy color.

"Why do we eat only unleavened bread on Passover?"

"The Jews were in a hurry," said the sheriff. "And so are we. Not enough time for the bread to rise."

"I think that's right," said Dave.

“It is,” said Lev.

“Okay,” Dave said. “Last question. I always thought tradition said to eat the Passover meal lying down. So why are we doing it sitting up?”

“That’s a good question,” said Beatrice.

“Because we don’t know what we’re doing and we don’t have any place to stretch out.” Lev put his lettuce-speared fork down and suddenly glanced at the window as if he expected the ghouls to come crashing through.

Rachel followed his gaze. A cold pasty sweat plastered her jeans to her thighs. The tops of her socks felt tight, as if her toes were being strangled.

The boys looked at each other, then at Lev.

“Why can’t we just lie down?” said Leo. “Like, on the floor.”

“Time for the Passover story,” said Lev. “Who wants to tell it?”

“Who knows it?” said Dave. “Guess you’re elected.”

Lev finished his third glass of wine and everyone followed suit, like line dancers learning the Electric Slide. Rachel pushed the doubt out of her head. “I believe I believe... I believe. We will live.”

Lev’s voice seemed to purr. And by the time the plagues had released their venom on Egypt, she was on her third glass of wine of the required four. She focused on the sound of Lev’s velvety telling of the story, soft as the wine, and forgot for minutes the spooks outside.

Then, disturbing the welcome fog that had risen from the wine and the words, she closed her eyes and caught a glimpse of some dark, feathered creature climbing down from a treetop at the west side of Ewell’s house. She blinked to shut out the clear vision, as if captured on a movie reel, of the burning, writhing ghost of Nuno Sievers rolling on soaked grass. He became invisible for a moment as if the rain puddles had squelched his flames, leaving only the blackness of the night. She breathed deep into her belly. For just a moment, her mind was free of him. But steam rose where the puddles had been. His embers reignited into red coals covering a humped mass that emitted a green glow. There rose a shape like an orangutan: furless, ashen, but winged, as if perhaps dipped in tar and set aflame. It

scrambled to its stumpy legs and screamed in pain, staggering forward. The feathers of its blackened wings were growing longer. Soon it would be ready to fly.

“And now for another glass of wine,” said Lev.

Dave poured more wine in the glasses around the table. Everyone raised his or her cup.

The children touched tiny sherry glasses with a clink.

“Blessed are you Lord our God ruler of the universe creator of the fruit of the vine,” said Lev.

From her seat, Rachel peered around the corner to the foyer and looked at the wandering clock as it told the wrong time.

After the explanation of the Passover, matzoh, *maror*, and *karpas*, Lev stood. “Somewhere in here we need to wash our hands again,” he said. “I’m not sure but this feels right.”

She rose and got behind him; everyone else lined up behind her.

“This time, we pray. ‘Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to wash our hands.’” After the sharing of the *afikomen*, they ate the fruit and nut paste, the beets and the hard-boiled eggs.

Rachel took a sip of wine, matzoh melting on her tongue into something like Holy Communion. She pushed her glass away and finished the unleavened bread, every crumb on her plate. What she really wanted was an Oreo.

“I believe, I believe, I believe we will survive.” She whispered the mantra to herself as again the newsreel of some horrible collection of agony that was once Nuno Sievers projected onto the screen of her mind, exposing his lipless charred mouth, his skinless hunched form, emaciated, all the fat having melted from his muscle.

Dave clinked the bottle against her glass, dribbling only a few drops into the bottom of the cup. He did the same for the children, then meandered around the table filling the rest of the glasses. “Do those things out there know how many glasses we’ve had? Can they count to four?”

“No way,” said Creed. “Don’t worry. We’ve had plenty.”

Lev walked to the window and stared through the wavy glass. “I’m worried. I don’t know the responsive reading we’re

supposed to do now.” His voice deflated. “I don’t know any of the songs we’re supposed to sing. All I can do is conclude the Seder and I’ll have to invent some words. I’m sorry.”

“Go ahead and make it up,” said Rachel. “It’s okay.”

“I’ll try.” He leaned forward, still looking out the window. He cocked his head, pressed his forehead against the glass, then faced the others at the table. His face was pale and sweaty. He shook his head, biting his cheek. He sighed. “There are some little green shiny creatures in the grass. They look like moles.”

Everyone but Rachel and her mother ran to the window. “We’ve seen them before,” said Rachel. “Ectoplasm.”

There was a light knock on the porch door. It came again; again, faintly, then louder. “Shhhhhh,” said Beatrice, a finger to her lips.

As if an order for dispersal had been given, everyone separated. Some went back to the table, others to various positions around the room. Creed picked up a rifle and pointed at the door. Rachel ignored Dave’s arm, which sought to restrain her, and went to see who was there.

“Get away from there.” Dave’s command was punctuated by the cock of Creed’s rifle. Rachel looked through the large glass pane, seeing nothing but blackness. Then backed away.

The door slowly opened, leaving Tripper Enwright framed in the entrance like a grotesque artwork hung in a museum. He was dripping from the rain. His huge head bobbed on a scrawny neck that leaned this way then that.

“Enwright,” Rachel muttered. “What are you doing here?”

“Good evening.” The district attorney took a step into the room and removed his hat. He stepped over to the table and took the empty seat that’d been left for the prophet Elijah. “Don’t stand on my account.” He gestured with a tiny hand for everyone to sit down.

“That’s not your seat,” said Zack.

“True,” said Enwright, “yet, I am availing myself of it. I’m sure you don’t mind.”

“That door was locked,” stammered Rachel, her own words causing an icy flood of terror to course down her back. Again, she felt herself to be dreaming. The sensation so undesired, so bothersome, it caused a flash of anger.

“Evidently, it wasn’t,” said Enwright. “I fear you folks have become disorganized.”

“I’ve a mind to run you in,” said the sheriff. “Breaking and entering. Trespassing.”

“Do sit down,” said Enwright. “Everyone, please. You can put down the rifle, Mr. Creed. Someone tell the Jew that this is no pogrom. In fact, judging by the obvious, it looks like a Seder. Is this a Seder? Who are you trying to fool with it?”

“That’s none of your business,” said the sheriff, taking a seat, pointing a cocked finger between Enwright’s eyes.

“That door was locked,” said Dave, taking a seat beside the sheriff. “How did you open it? And how did you get by those creatures in the yard—and the green balls.”

“Creatures in the yard? Green balls? Are you all right?” Enwright frowned. “I didn’t see anything like that...no creatures, no balls...and I opened the door by walking up to it and turning the knob. How do people usually get into a place?”

“He’s a liar,” said Lev, sitting down at the table.

“You’re the liar,” said Enwright, “All Jews are. They lie to anyone not in their clan.”

“Shut your mouth,” said Lev.

“Since the time of Moses, your people have developed laws that are commendable...‘Thou shall not steal,’ ‘Thou shall not kill,’ ‘Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.’ But never have you practiced them with any but your own kind. Your God has ordered murder, rape, and the pillage of Goyim.”

“Get out of here, Enwright,” said Dave.

“Who’s murdered innocent people as witches and embroiled the world in wars that have slaughtered millions?” Lev said, crossing his arms. “Look no further than your people.”

“That’s enough,” snapped Rachel.

“I checked the door earlier.” Beatricia made the sign of the cross.

“So did I,” said Creed.

“Maybe he picked the lock,” said Zack.

“I think you have a lot of explaining to do,” said the sheriff, “What are those things out in the yard and what do you know about what’s going on here?”

A slight smile came to Enwright, his neck tottering, head

bobbing. When he smiled, white teeth shone in the black shadow of his stubble.

“I don’t know anything about anything in the yard. Or what you say is there. All I know is that there’ve been some murders. And that you all are holing up here instead of getting out of Dodge.”

“What do you know about Nuno Sievers?” Wise said.

“Sievers,” mused Enwright, frowning. “That’s going back some years. He was an insane ex-writer who died in a shack fire about a mile from here, back in the woods.”

“As I’ve discovered,” said the sheriff. “And you defended his killers.”

“They were innocent, Sheriff,” said Enwright, “Good boys. Every one of them has made something of himself.”

“That may be,” said the sheriff. “Now, let’s circle back a little bit. Tell me how you got past those things in the front yard. Let’s see. You pulled up in your car, got out...”

Enwright raised both hands, palms upward. “Sheriff, I’m telling the truth. There was nothing out there but darkness, far as I could see.”

Dave got up, walked to the window, and looked out. “There’s nothing there now,” he said. “I can’t account for it.”

Rachel went over as well. She looked out. Nothing. This insect, Enwright, knew everything about what was going on—the specters, the slimy green balls, the murders, animal magnetism, Nuno Sievers playing out the role of the Angel of Death. She was sure of it. The little freak could save all their lives if he would only talk, but he wouldn’t. If she had the nerve, she would take a rifle and—

“Okay,” said the sheriff. “You didn’t see anything, in spite of the fact that we were watching them things from the window when you knocked on the door.”

“The driveway runs up the side of the yard,” Enwright said. “Maybe I just missed them. If you don’t mind, Mr. Creed, can you point that rifle somewhere else?”

“I’ve had enough of this,” said Rachel, returning to the table, sitting down heavily across from Enwright, who was sitting in the Elijah seat. “I don’t believe a thing you’ve said so far. But I’m going to give you the chance to tell the truth about something at

least. Why the hell have you come back here?"

Enwright ceased smiling and looked straight at Lev. "To tell you to get rid of the Jew," Enwright said. "He knows a great deal more than he's telling. In fact, he's a major part of what's happening."

"And you come to know this how?" said the sheriff. Enwright sneered.

"He's a Jew."

"That's it?" said Rachel. "No suspicious acts? No actual evidence, even circumstantial evidence?"

"You have to understand how the Jew works. He's subtle, his influence at first almost invisible, but he sews discord at every opportunity. Destroying a small town by fear is only a warm-up for taking over Washington or international banking. To use financing at no interest from his brethren to buy up Zebulon properties and form coalitions to take over the media, education, industries."

"Get out of my house," Rachel said. "And stay away."

"Enwright," Dave said. "I think you're the one who knows a lot more about this than he's telling."

"Funny those things disappeared when you showed up," said Creed.

"Tell us how you opened that door," Beatricia demanded.

Enwright said nothing. The sheriff rose slowly, putting a hand on Rachel's shoulder. He took a step toward the Elijah seat. "Enwright, I won't order you to leave this house because I know it's dangerous. But I can arrest and put you in restraints for breaking and entering."

"I'll go," said Enwright. "My own free will."

"What if the things outside only let him pass before because they wanted to trap him in here with us?" said Beatricia. "There's no guarantee they'll let him leave now."

"They'll let him go all right," Creed laughed. "The little creep is tight with those buggers.

Maybe they sent him in to stop the Seder."

"Zack," said Beatricia. "Go into the living room and fetch my Tarot."

To Rachel, the room now felt unbearably hot. She wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of one hand. The fire in

the stove was blazing. She wanted Enwright to go. She prayed the bastard would leave, she willed him to. But she wanted any information he had. If only she could read his mind.

He fidgeted and wrung his hands. Then pushed back from the table and stood, his limbs shaking, his eyes blinking fiercely. "I'm going," he said. "Be careful of your pet Jew."

The sheriff seemed on the point of ordering him to stop, but then let him go. Dave switched the porch light on.

Enwright opened the door, left, and shut it behind him.

The explosion that followed was so powerful the house shook. Wise lost his balance and fell. Creed dropped his rifle. Rachel got up and looked out.

There was little left of Enwright, as if a bomb planted in his body had blown him up.

What looked like fine ground beef was spread over the floor of the porch.

"He's dead," she muttered, horrified, but, otherwise, feeling nothing.



When the makeshift Seder ended, Rachel returned to the living room, her children like puppies flanking her, the feet of the others stuttering on the oak floors between the kitchen and the dining room. The swirling wind stepped up its fury, beating the boxwood branches against all four sides of the Sheltons' house.

“Hope those horses head back to the stable.” Wise strode into the living room, put his eye to the camera atop the tripod, and scanned the dark pasture beyond the north window. “But maybe they ain’t.” Rain spat at the shaking glass. A screech from outside rocked him back on his heels.

Rachel’s mind turned to the great bat of her unholy dreams—the splayed wings that had dropped their shadow on her innocence. She sank deeply into the soft leather chair by the woodstove.

Wolfie leapt from the Oriental carpet, one shade more orange than he, into her lap, a sprawling ten pounds holding her down, wet cold nose prodding her palm.

“Well, the spooks with torches for hands have come back.” Dave was gazing in the direction of the north pasture, over the sheriff’s burly shoulder. “There’s a ghost on each side of the house again,” the sheriff said. Dave nodded.

“The murders have never been committed the same way

twice,” said Wise.

Rachel had heard him repeat this so many times it seemed like a mantra. At first she'd believed he was trying to convince himself any new murder would be different, but now the phrase seemed more a *modus operandi*, a clue of such great significance, the sheriff had to be looking for deeper meanings.

“Maybe that was just chance or maybe it means there'll be no more evaporations, explosions, or wrecked cars, or murder by tractor,” Wise stated this blandly, as if not lingering to parse the meaning of his words. Rachel knew different. She knew the sheriff wasn't in a literal frame of mind.

“There are plenty of other ways to die.” Dave moved the video camera into a corner under his painting of a cattle feedlot, then stood beside the sheriff.

Zack rolled his eyes, an annoying habit. “Mom. Those things out there.” He drew a circle in the air with a pointing finger. “They're not ghosts.”

Rachel's eyes rose upward. A doily formally placed beneath a Murano glass vase on the mantle had plastered itself on the ceiling, defying gravity. No, no broken law of physics could shock her now. Her eyes narrowed. “Okay, ghouls then.”

“No, Mom.” Zack grabbed a chenille throw, dropping himself down on the Ottoman, and stared at the smoldering coals of the woodstove. “Ghouls don't appear at night with their bodies on fire. Besides, there's no such thing as flesh eaters from the grave.”

“Are too,” said Leo.

“That's just in the movies,” said Zack, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders.

“They're dust reanimated by Nuno Sievers,” said Beatrice. On the sofa, she seemed perched on a throne, arms thrust out straight before her, canes tapping the floor.

“That's right, Grandma,” said Zack. “That's exactly what they are.”

The room was growing warmer. Waves of heat from the wood stove engulfed the end tables, sofa, salon chairs. Votive candles on the sills flickered, wicks drowning in waxy pools.

Sheriff Wise sat next to Beatrice. Dave turned away from the darkness and jammed a log into the stove over flaming embers, half smothering them. Rain drove in perpendicular streaks as

if some merciful force, perhaps the earth herself, was trying to put out the flaming hands of the specters. But the dark, shadowy figures remained.

Rachel saw them as knots on a noose being tightened around the Shelton house. “They’re coming closer,” she said.

None of the men got up to look. They sat silent, pale and shivering in spite of the heat.

Rachel rocked and stroked Wolfie to the rhythm of the wind. Shutting her eyes for a moment, she pictured the blistering figure perched in the Harper’s maple tree, across the street from Daisyland, flapping its black wings, as if preparing to fly. Iron manacles of panic clutched at her heart and constricted her throat. She knew that maple tree, the one with the tire swing that her own children had played on. But worse was that she had seen the figure years before. The great bat from childhood that had invaded her dreams and brought night terrors. It seemed to her now she should have always known it because she had never actually parted from it, but had only ignored it, denied it. Irresponsibly, egotistically, as if she’d had the power to send it out of existence.

“No, not a ghost. Not exactly,” she said, contrite in her enlightenment.

Beatricia dropped a cane. Rachel stopped rocking, set Wolfie on the carpet, and picked the cane up.

“Mother,” Rachel whispered, hoping no one else could hear. “You were right. I’ve seen it too. Not just today. For years. In my dreams. The ghost of Nuno Sievers. Well—not a ghost. But something close to it.”

“Real ghosts aren’t evil,” Zack said. “They’re good.”

“How do you know?” said Rachel. “You’ve only known one—Isabel.”

“Isabel says they aren’t.”

“And what else does she say, Zack? That she loves you?” She knew better but couldn’t hold back the words. “Have you made love to a dead girl?”

A sudden gasp from everyone, then silence, as if the room had inhaled. Rachel felt all eyes upon her. Zack’s face flushed. He didn’t have a sarcastic comeback, which was unlike him.

That confirmed it.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Creed.

She could hear his words but barely absorbed them. She dragged herself to the bathroom and squatted down to rifle through her medical supply box. She found a 10 cc syringe and a 22-gauge needle, then hunted for a bigger syringe and a smaller needle. She grabbed a few alcohol wipes, and then hurried to the kitchen to get a dog food bowl, four cups and a tea towel. She returned with her arms full to the living room and dropped the supplies on the rectory table. Seated in a straight chair at one end, Creed rolled up his sleeve and offered his arm, laying it on the dented African hardwood of the table.

Rachel put her hand on his wrist. “Thank you, George,” she whispered as she tore open an alcohol swab.

“No!” said Lev. “No.” He shook his head so hard his curls bounced. “Absolutely not. Use something soap and water. No alcohol.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Creed. “Just tear open my scab if you want. Give me the needle.”

“I’ll take those,” said Lev, who took the swabs and threw them in the wood stove. “Shit.

The fire’s almost out.”

Dave hurried over and helped him wrestle with the large wet log that had almost extinguished the fire only minutes ago. After cracking cured kindling, they restarted the fire, and burned what was left of the *chametz*.

“I’m sorry,” said Rachel. “I forgot about the alcohol.”

Dave turned around. “Is there more?”

“No,” she said, tying a satin gift ribbon around Creed’s arm. It would have to do for a tourniquet. She tapped a few times on the ventral aspect of his small, muscular forearm and popped the needle into a vein that looked like a tree trunk with spreading roots. There was a sanguineous flash in the syringe. She untied the purple satin, extracting a full ten milliliter tube, unscrewed the syringe, and squirted the blood into the first cup. She repeated the procedure three times.

Creed watched, unfazed, inflated in his bravery. He seemed to have grown four inches. “Okay, baby,” said Creed. “Let’s get the job done.”

Rachel smoothed a yellow Band-Aid over the oozing hole in Creed's skin. He looked depleted. "Spongebob?"

"Sorry. I don't have any plain Band-Aids." She handed a cup of blood to Dave, one to the sheriff, one to Lev.

"Let's man the doors." Lev doled out white handkerchiefs to each of the men and to Rachel. He kept one for himself. "Remember," he said. "Smear it on the outside lintels and door jams. We'll open the doors all at the same time. Creed will turn out the last of the lights so those creatures can't see us. Take less than ten seconds to smear the blood. Then close the doors and lock them behind you."

Zack and Leo made a quick round, blowing out candles of the rooms downstairs. The sheriff glided toward the back door of the house carefully balancing his cup of blood. Dave walked softly toward the porch.

Returning from smearing blood on the upstairs windowsills, Creed stationed himself at the light switch in the foyer. Rachel stationed herself at the front door within reach of Creed, whose fingers were on the switch. Lev, carrying his cup of blood reverently as an offering, put his hand on the doorknob at the west side of the house, and said a short prayer, with words spoken too quietly for the others to hear.

"Okay," said Rachel. "Everyone ready?"

Creed threw the light switch, submerging the house in darkness. "They'll come now," said Beatrice. "Very soon."

"He's on the way," mumbled Rachel.



Nuno Sievers did not know his name. Nor did he care. His body, plumped up and sizzling, was bursting with heat, its skin charred black and flapping in shriveled strips. His eyes were melting, oozing light. His brows were singed; his ears and nose reduced to ash, their cavities, tunnels to nowhere. He had three fingers, no toes. He wanted to scream, but even in death his tongue was a torment, a blackened stump capable of orchestrating only incoherent utterances. His chest could propel only an occasional bellow.

He beat his heavy black wings, balancing on a thick limb high in a maple tree. From him blazed the energy that he'd gathered in the cellar when the boys had burned him, and then in the hospital when he'd slipped into death and the doctors had pulled him out again and again and again and left him to live too many days after that. He remembered the burn unit, when his skin had hardened and the doctors had debrided him, cutting away shrinking crusts of skin. He recalled cold grease dressings and the grafts from the dead pig that never took, and the mummy's wraps.

Then he died. His remains were buried in a lawn cemetery on the outskirts of Zebulon. But his beaten soul lay as a ghost in the basement in the woods, through twenty years of death and suffering, waiting for release, his rage growing, enveloping

him, at last exploding.

In his mind, he saw the Shelton house a half-mile away while his nose smelled of two first-born sons with the Light behind them. His heart cried out, *Let my people go!*

A few words of Holy Scripture came to him from an old woman's lips and stirred his heart.

"I'm going to stop reciting now," Beatricia said, suddenly, horror in her voice. "I'm giving him more power."

The old woman and her daughter—how he hated them for touching him with their minds, causing him pain beyond endurance. He threw his gathered strength through lanes of darkness to his acolytes positioned around the house—power bursting out through their hands. He would trap the Sheltons' first-born boys, drain them dry, then burn them to ash.

The whole house shook. The windows, bricks, floors and ceilings. Dust fell like flurries of snow. Dishes clattered; knives and forks leapt from their drawers. Lights winked on and off all over the house as switches rattled up and down. Windows flared with lightning, and then went dark, one by one.

The old woman had been thrown from the sofa and lay gasping on the floor, a sea of dark below her sinking, dropping away. She called out for the younger woman who cowered, trembling in the foyer near an antique wardrobe that loomed above her, tipping in shadow. The apostate Jew, who'd slammed the porch door shut, was surrounded by dining room chairs walking toward him, colliding with one another like drunken buffalo. The table had flipped over and lay in the darkness like a turtle on its back. The tall man who had fathered one of the firstborns jammed the handle of the stove door with a poker to incarcerate the firelight, his face filled with rage—and fear. The piano rolled across the foyer, and was threatening to run him down like the tractor that had squashed the Haitian man by the barn. In the kitchen, the maple butcher-block marched after the fat man in uniform and backed him up against the counter.

The two firstborns were caught in the living room huddled against a wall, books and pictures raining on their ducked heads and crouched shoulders. There would have to be more pictures, more books, a houseful of them, until their lungs compressed and they couldn't breathe.

He shrieked with the fire that burned up through him. The boys were still moving.

He fisted the remaining fingers of his hands because he couldn't rush in to slay them—because of the blood.

He leapt from the branch, wings spread, and hung in rain and darkness. He could wait.



The rain pounded the windows, but the house drew its brick shell tightly around its shoulders and shut out the night's weather. Poking its cables into the belly of the dark, it thrust itself upward, sentinel and fortress, momentarily blessed by the Lord, sealed tight by blood and the Seder. No crack to exploit, no whoosh of wind or rustling of leaves. No branches breaking under thunder, only the tiniest whispers inside—the light fingering of Dave at the piano, the dripping of faucets and creaking of boards.

Leo whimpered and the house groaned in sympathy.

Creed felt his way to a switch in the living room and flipped it up, illuminating all the lamps.

Pinned against the kitchen counter, Wise pried his bruised hands free and then heaved his stomach against the heavy maple butcher block, grunting. Its stocky legs slid away across the hard pine of the kitchen floor.

The men dragged furniture back in place; the sofa was soon in its spot before the windows, plaster dust salting the chenille upholstery. End tables flanked the couch squarely once again. Bookcases were realigned. The glass of two windowpanes lay shattered on carpets in the living room. But blood ran on the sills and the rain failed to penetrate the house. It could not be heard.

Lev and Creed dragged the Chinese armoire housing the stereo system and TV back into the corner of the living room, beside the camera mounted on its tripod, still recording.

Rachel pushed the dining room table back into place under the hole in the ceiling, then settled the chairs around the table. She startled when a chunk of plaster dropped onto the boiled beets that sat in the middle of the Seder plate.

“The blood is keeping the evil out,” said Beatrice, hobbling into the foyer.

Dave rolled the piano back to its corner across the oak floor. He struck its keys, sending a chord through the house that summoned its inhabitants into the living room, into which they paraded, flushed and armed. Rachel was clutching a knife from the kitchen, Lev, a hammer he picked up from a windowsill, and the rest, their rifles and pistols. Beatrice leaned on one cane and shook the other as if it were a cudgel. Even Leo had his drumsticks and Zack an old electric guitar he was willing to use as a club.

Rachel went to the broken window and stuck a hand out to touch the vibrations of rain and frozen air. The night evaporated and she was looking into a front yard that was as bright as day where Nuno Sievers was floating to the ground, body dark as soot, black wings fluttering, eyes aflame.



He's here," Rachel said from the window. She looked over a shoulder composing herself as thoroughly as she could, then backed away from her reflection in the glass.

A tremor shook the house. The night turned black, and the men, rushing to the window, saw what Rachel saw—only darkness and the fire in Mr. Petty's hands.

"He's coming closer," said Dave. "Whether we can see him or not."

"They're all coming," said Beatricea, not looking toward the window, but inward, as if she too saw the approach of the specters in her brain.

"Let them," said Creed. "If the blood doesn't stop them, we'll stop 'em with bullets."

Beatricea broke into a chant, Lev into prayer. The sheriff went to the back window and saw that the specter of Ruiz was no longer frozen in the north pasture but moving toward the house.

"If one is coming, they're all coming." Wise said. "I imagine the cat, too. Maybe the horse."

"Aristino will never attack us." said Rachel. "Whether he's animated by that thing or not."

Dave walked to the side door of the living room. "I see two pairs of flaming hands," he said, "getting closer."

Rachel did a quick count. Three dead deputies, Mr. Petty,

and Mr. Ewell—all revived and powered by Sievers. “If we stop him, we’ll stop all of them.”

“Nuno must realize he’s not the Angel of Death. That the boys aren’t Egyptians, or Nazis,” said Lev.

“Yeah.” Creed snorted. “Reason with a ghost who’s been burned alive by skinheads and grown black wings.”

The house turned quiet as the moon. No sign of Nuno. Lev ceased praying and Creed lay down on the floor in the foyer, his rifle pointed at the front door. Soon, the sheriff sat on a dining room chair and leveled his Winchester on the side porch door. Dave, rifle ready, took up a firing position by the kitchen window.

Lev manned the side door to the west with the rusted hammer. Then, breaking the silence, the whine of a tractor’s ignition started up, followed by the growl of an engine.

“Leveaux,” Lev said.

Rachel’s mouth filled with saliva. Deep in her mind, she saw the outside locks all turning counterclockwise by themselves.

She dropped to her knees as the door latches clicked in sequence, knobs rattling. “Holy Jesus,” muttered the sheriff. “They’re going to get in.”

But then the doors, in spite of being unlocked, held.

Creed giggled. Rachel’s wail died in her throat. Leo, salt tracks dry on his cheeks, gripped a drumstick in one hand like a knife. Zack lifted his old guitar, ready to bring it down on whatever came through the east porch entrance.

The ghosts banged on the doors, great crashing thuds that threatened to split the wood and tear the hinges from their oak frames.

It went on and on, for seconds, maybe minutes. The force of the banging loosened doorjambs and lintels. Dust sifted from joints. The bluster of the tractor’s engine reached the east side of the house. Then a crash shook brick walls when the porch gave way, rammed by tractor wheels. Beatrice held her ears and cried out with the pain of it.

Rachel gathered Leo into her arms, screaming for Zack to run to her too. Creed fired a round through the front door but it failed to stop the pounding.

“Fuck you!” Zack yelled, then plugged in his guitar, cranked

up the amp, and beat at the noise with boisterous riffs and arpeggios.

Dave screamed in anger, fists tight to his chest as if fighting the impulse to throw open the door and thrash at the ghosts. The sheriff held steady. The door to the side porch shuddered, bulged, but held up, unbelievably, inexplicably.

Nuno Sievers could fly. He might be breaking into the house through an upstairs window; but Rachel guessed he hadn't. If he had, they'd already be dead. The blood must be working. It had to be. She felt a sense of elation, suddenly, tentatively. They might win. They might live.

Then she had a horrible thought—*rain. What if the rain washes the blood from the doors and windows? What then?*

It was quiet. The noise of the tractor's engine had died away. Five minutes. Ten minutes.

Everyone drifted back to the living room and came together again, to avoid being alone.

Rachel stared straight out the wavy glass of the living room window. Mr. Petty was in the front yard, hands aflame, near the house. She could feel the rest of them, as if her body were a compass. There were specters between the boxwoods, in the jonquils, in the herb bed, and under the basketball hoop. Besides Petty to the south, Leveaux was to the west, Ewell and Ruiz to the north, Crockett to the east. Four little flames were moving close to the ground in the front yard, as if they belonged to the tiny feet of a cat.

Something knocked, softly and politely, on the front door.

At first, no one said a word. Rachel waited for the careful rapping to intensify into a rage of knocks that would send the door flying from between its jambs; but no angry pounding came.

The light tapping continued, followed by the quiet sobbing of children. "Please let us in. We're cold."

"Please, Ms. Rachel. Let us in."

Rachel felt a force akin to gravity drawing her toward the door. Her thoughts were blurred. Her heart throbbed. She shook her head, trying to turn from the door; the voices were so plaintive, so pitiful. She looked out the window at the two young Harper boys drooping in the moonlight, cocooned in wet

bed sheets, dark-eyed and pale, shivering. Rachel was startled by blood from their bullet wounds running down their cheeks. Their soaked locks, plastered to their foreheads, were caked with dried blood the color of old bricks.

“I’m hungry,” said one. “And wet.”

“I’m cold,” said the other, his little voice almost lost in the dark of night. “And hungry.”

Rachel longed to throw her arms around them and hold their little heads to her breast. To wash away the bloody tears dripping from their eyes. She wanted to feed them and tuck them into bed, kissing each cheek. But the door was in the way and she wasn’t to open it.

“Let me in,” pleaded one, eyes round and beseeching. He brought his flaming palms to his face, the glow illuminating tiny pointed teeth. “I’m scared.”

“I’m afraid,” said the other. “Let me in.”

Rachel’s vision wavered, as if she were being mesmerized and sucked forward. The impulse was overwhelming. She was dreaming, unable to feel her fingers. Her hand moved closer to the brass doorknob, fingers slowly forming a cup.

Supported by her two canes, Beatricia, suddenly beside her, grasped her hand and yanked it back. “Those aren’t the Harper boys,” she said. “The poor children are dead. The blood on the frames is keeping these specters out. But if you open the door for them—”

Rachel gasped at what she had almost done and turned her back on the door, leaning against it with all of her weight.

“Do not let them in, Rachel.”

Beatricia looked like she was dying, as if she’d finally taken one too many steps into the other world and was paying the price. She was pale, her hand cold. She stumbled and Rachel caught her in her arms and put two fingers to her wrist.

Faint, too faint.

“My Rachel,” Beatricia said. “You must take over for me now. You must talk to Isabel. Persuade her to take Nuno into the light.”

“Don’t try to talk, Mother.”

“There’s a portal,” said Beatricia. “The closet on the landing.”

The truth of what her mother was saying exploded into

Rachel's mind. Of course, there was a portal. If there were ghosts, there were portals, passageways leading between the world of the living to the world of the dead.

At that moment the house shook as if trying to shed its roof. The foundation groaned and the remaining window glass shattered. Plates and saucers fell from shelves. The men and Zack and Leo tumbled over the furniture, stumbling from one room to the other. Then, suddenly, the quaking stopped. Rain was coming in the windows.

"The blood on the doors is washing off," shouted Beatrice, as if she were making a final statement. Rachel struggled to hold her up but the old woman slipped out of her embrace, collapsing in the foyer, gripping her chest.



Dave got up from the kitchen floor, where blood from his cut forehead was settling into a pool. The rain blowing through the window over the sink soaked his clothes. He wiped water from his eyes and saw the outside door bulging, splintering.

Throwing his body against it, he ignored the shards of oak that stabbed at his face and throat.

Rachel couldn't see anything but vague shapes of gray. The darkness loomed like an unsolvable labyrinth. Like driving through fog, she strained to see, then realized it was no use. She made her eyes soft and let her imagination and intuition work together.

In the living room, Lev jammed the east porch door shut with his foot and swung the hammer at fiery fingers poking through the cracks in the wood. No matter. In another instant, the hands were gone but the 8N's engine had started again. The front end of the tractor rammed through the side door and Lev sprawled to the living room floor. Both doorjambes collapsed in a rain of plaster. Everywhere in the house there was the sound of thunder, as if a squall had moved inside.

Creed pressed his back against the door to the west porch. But still, the heavy oak shook, threatening to explode. Glass shattered. Broken roof shingles and shells from the driveway

flew across the room like shrapnel. Creed and the sheriff hurled themselves against the door, throwing down their rifles, faces webbed with blood. Zack rushed behind them, his guitar poised over his head like a club. Leo climbed on top of the dining room table, shouting and waving drumsticks.

Wolfie tore from his closet, howling.

Rachel covered her ears as wind ripped through the caved-in door on the east end of the house. The storm shrieked like a squadron of phantoms, blowing paintings from the walls and lamps from their tables.

Rachel arched her torso over the body of her mother. She shook angrily in the foyer, focused on the front door, anxious for Nuno Sievers to enter.

She could hear the men all around her, fighting, bleeding, protecting, and maybe dying. The door shuddered, then fell off its hinges, smoking.



Nuno floated through the doorway and hovered in the entry, howling. He was ten feet from Rachel, the tips of his wings fluttering, melting eyeballs oozing down his cheekbones.

A thin figure with stubs for legs and arms that ended in blue-gray claws, he doubled over, wings drooping. The vision struck Rachel. It was as if an Ibis-headed man had been freed from Tutankhamen's tomb. So this would be the murder weapon this time. The creature's hooked beak ready to tear at their throats. His proboscis arched and tapered to the point of a needle.

Spattering like bacon grease in a hot pan, sizzling fat burst between the cracks in his blackened skin. Droplets landed on Rachel's face. She wiped them away with the back of a frantic hand.

Nuno's charred face twisted in agony. Locks of flaming hair stood on end. Maybe the devil had snatched his hair.

His bill gaped wide and his jaw cracked. The sharp, broken teeth slanted forward in a muddled row. His tongue smoldered and darted. He screeched with a voice so hollow and so terrible, Rachel saw the black notes rising from a purgatorial well.

The pressure on the doors ceased abruptly. The rain and thunder stopped.

Rachel heard her mother's death rattle at her feet. She dropped to the floor, and watched the chest rise, at times heaving, then for several moments, ceasing to move altogether. Rachel pressed two fingers to Beatricia's neck and fastened her own mouth to her mother's cool lips and delivered two huge rescue breaths. She felt Beatricia's final exhalation and sucked it in, deep into her lungs. This was Bea's last kiss.

Rachel felt warm, moist air tasting of honey enter her mouth. She pulled it into her chest by expanding her abdomen and ribcage. The breath she'd received became hot, and transformed itself into something that traveled in a single beat of her heart to the very tips of her fingers, toes, the end of her nose, the edges of her ears. It wasn't just her mother's final kiss. Rachel had absorbed something of her wisdom too. And knowledge. And a part of her spirit. With a brush of her fingertips she checked to see if the hairs on her arms were really standing on end. They were, as if magnetized. A steaming wind of hatred swept over her in an instant when she looked up at Nuno.

But then she heard her mother's voice, "*No, Rachel. Hate won't save you. What does he want?*"

Rachel looked down, and closed her mother's eyes gently. She kissed her lips and folded her hands across her chest, then followed the white ribbon to the embroidered scapula of Saint Jude, patron saint of lost causes, or almost lost. She kissed both sides of the sachet, and stuffed it back under her mother's dress into her cleavage, motionless, but still moist with sweat.

"I can save them, Mother. I will do it. I promise," she said. Rachel began pumping her mother's chest even though she was certain the old woman was dead. "Mother! Mother! Don't leave me! Not now!"

A final death rattle rose in Beatricia's throat. She shook, a last gasp escaping her lips.

Then she lay still.

Rachel's instincts shouted at her hands to keep pumping. But Beatricia's spirit rushed like the winds of the Lord, thrusting Rachel backward, eyes burning and watering.

The bird-man was watching. Yes. Nuno was after something, even if he didn't yet know what it was. The awareness of it drove Rachel to her feet.

Dave ran from the kitchen to the vestibule, the children following close behind like boy soldiers.

The glow from Nuno's body dimmed, then flared like a flash of metal from Vulcan's forge. Molten light poured through the doors of the house into every room, as if the energy from Ewell and Petty and the other ghosts was being withdrawn from their shells and reabsorbed by Nuno, leaving only shattering and smoldering forms on the four porches and lawns. Smoky embers embedded in his body glowed red like erupting jewels.

But something was holding Nuno back.

Rachel needed to figure out what it was, and fast. So she spun around, hyper-focused, observing all she could in those few moments. To her right, the engine of the tractor that'd crashed through the living room wall began to sputter. Leveau's body, now a pile of ash on the vinyl seat, was drifting to the floor like black snowflakes. On her other side, the sooty remains of Crockett and Petty were sifting onto the bleeding bodies of Creed and the sheriff, both stretched out on the dining room floor.

"Dave!" screamed Rachel. "Take the children upstairs."

"Not without you!" Dave grabbed Rachel's wrist. "You're coming with us."

"Not this time," she said. "Go!"

His guitar lifted over his head, Zack poised to swing, pupils dilated, eyes mad. Tears springing to his eyes, Leo threatened with his drumsticks. Taking up their rifles, the sheriff, Creed, and Lev leapt to their feet and rushed to the foyer.

"No, Dave." Rachel pulled free. "Take everyone upstairs. Now!"

Nuno didn't move. Flames rolled over him and smoke fogged the air as he twisted and moaned, body swelling with rage. In moments, he was twice the size he had been before, claws extended, black wings flapping. But then, he fluttered backwards, almost to the doorway.

Why did he hesitate? Rachel heard her mother whispering inside her. And then, Rachel heard, quietly at first, the sound of the beast weeping.

An image of young Nuno at Belsen, bending over the bullet-mangled corpse of his little sister, flashed into Rachel's mind.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said.

Nuno’s whimpers were deep and hoarse. He shook all over. His claws interlocked, as if hands in prayer.

“I can help you.”

He crept toward her, and where he’d been hovering a dusting of black powder lingered like pencil shavings. She imagined the remains of patients who’d been cremated, now collected in the columbarium at the Episcopal Church of Zebulon, each cremation in a separate vault. Only in special cases, such as a mother dying in childbirth, were the remains of individuals mixed. Then she thought of the mass graves that were Nuno’s concern.

“Your people are free. There’s no more need to kill firstborn sons. But that’s not what you want to do anyway.”

Nuno moaned and let his head rock from side to side. The ruins of Dave’s painting of the ram horns lay next to him. The frame was in splinters, and the canvas had been torn.

“Go into the light,” she said.

Nuno stood and unfurled his wings with such violence the wind knocked her down. There was a growing hum like a fan in a wood stove.

She sneezed black soot into her forearm and scrambled to her feet. “You know it’s here.

You’ve always known it, Nuno. On the landing.”

Nuno floated forward, almost touching her. The heat from the tip of a wing nipped at her cheeks.

She looked toward the stairs. The ceiling was blackened with soot. Zack and Leo would need to get higher than the portal.

Rachel felt Zack’s frightened eyes on her back.

“Upstairs!” screamed Rachel. “Now! Third floor! Try for the attic!”

“Hurry.” Dave grabbed Zack’s free hand and scooped up Leo with one arm, bolting past Beatrice’s body. They flew up the stairs past the landing.

Creed cocked his rifle. Rachel could see he was ready to fill her house with thunder. “No,” said Wise, lifting both hands. “Stop it.”

“Let my people go,” Nuno said, his rasp deep and far away, as if oozing from a tar pit. Rachel stepped back as Nuno drifted forward.

“I told you, your people have been freed,” said Rachel. “From the camps! From Egypt!” Nuno stopped, and for a moment stared with melting eyes into the barrel of Creed’s Winchester, then floated forward like a cloud of bees.

“Your people are everywhere now,” said Rachel. “The diaspora, they’re free.” Nuno stopped drifting, paused.

“My boys are not Egyptian or Nazis,” she said. “They did not kill you.”

She turned and ran halfway up the staircase to the landing, Nuno hovered, as if stunned, in the foyer, rotating his head and roaring. She felt his heat burning the backs of her legs and shoulders. She knocked on the door of the quivering closet, its frame of varnished wood shivering under her fists.

“Open the door, Isabel. Please.” No answer.

“Isabel,” Rachel pleaded, struggling with the door to pull it open. “Nuno thinks he has to kill Zack, but he doesn’t. He mustn’t. What he really wants is to go home.”

Rachel yanked again, but something held the knob fast. The little ghost hands were gripping the knob from the other side, holding it tight. Isabel simply did not understand; if she didn’t help, her precious Zack would die. But perhaps that’s what Isabel wanted, to steal her son and keep him for an eternity?

“Please, Isabel,” begged Rachel. “Take Nuno into the light. I promise I’ll never interfere with you and Zack again. We’ll share him.”

Dave lurched out of a bedroom and ran to the top of the staircase. Rachel waved him away frantically.

“I’m staying,” he said. He stood on the top step, pointing his rifle down the stairwell. “I’ll never leave you, Rachel,” said Dave. “Or the boys.”

“Please, Isabel.” Rachel sank to her knees, an eye to the astragal. “If you love Zack, you’ll show Nuno the portal. I know you’re tempted to let Zack die so you’ll have him forever, but he’ll hate you for that. He’s not ready.”

Black wings steaming, emitting rings of ammoniac gas, Nuno Sievers flew howling up the stairs and hovered on the landing.

Slowly, the door creaked open, and hung there, agape, precariously held up by its greenish bolts. They appeared moldy, or crusted in oxidized copper. Rachel jumped away from the

door and climbed the last few steps to the top of the stairs into the arms of Dave.

“Love is the law,” she called behind her.

Looking down through the closet door, she glimpsed a young woman kneeling on a loveseat between racks of saddles and hanging bits and bridles within the chamber, which now appeared somehow larger. Meeting Rachel’s gaze, the girl’s startled eyes softened. Her face was pale and her lips red as sangria. Blonde ringlets fell from a purple ribbon, surrounding a heart-shaped face that looked alive. As she stood, shimmering trails of light raced behind her, as if she were moving at an unnatural speed that the mortal eye could not completely follow. Yet she was still.

“Isabel!” said Rachel. “You love Zack. Help us.”

Honeysuckle perfume at first overwhelmed and then replaced the rank odor of a burn pile that had filled the house over the last twenty-four hours.

The little ghost turned her head from Nuno to Rachel. Her eyes were wide as if to ask a question. She turned away, paled, looking offended, and went back into the closet.

The door slammed shut. Nuno’s black fury had pushed it closed. Or was it Isabel, pulling? Probably Nuno. The slamming of the door was supposed to shut the girl up and feed her fear.

“I believe in you, Isabel,” said Rachel, “Come back.”

Nuno turned and looked up at Rachel, his eye sockets locking her in.

Rachel struggled to free herself from his repulsive yet magnetic gaze. Anguish flew into her, breaking in waves, each hurling itself from the crest of the other. Wet sand and sea wrack blasted into her heaving breast. It penetrated her tender lungs like a shower of sewing needles.

So this was what it was like to be her mother, to accept the gift that was lavished upon her. The wisdom, too. Crying out, she forced herself to think wildly, sentimentally. She gathered up every half-baked Pollyanna notion her mother had ever shared with her and slammed a smile on her face, refusing to meet his rage with rage. The back of her eyes stung with fire. Tears rushed out. She collected from what remained of Nuno’s mind images of his mother and father and little cousin, Sylvie, who had escaped

with him from Belsen. She projected the images straight to the center of Nuno's chest.

"Go to the light," Rachel commanded.

Nuno bellowed and turned his head toward Rachel, who stood four steps above the floating ghost. Rachel steadied herself against the newel post at the top of the stair.

"Understand his pain." The ghost of her dead mother whispered. "You've always had that gift, Rachel."

Ever since you learned to boil water and gave tea parties for the dead. Remember when the twins next door died in Sharpsburg? You saw it in your mind while you repotted your orchids. You knew what was happening from far away. You talked to spirits in your room before you slept...and then, later, at medical school, you stood by the bed of the dead and dying and heard their voices."

Rachel remembered. It all came washing back at her. She recalled when the night terrors had started. March 23, 1991. The day Nuno Sievers was burned alive by the gang of high school boys. It had been all over the news, even covered in entertainment magazines—the first and only hate crime against a Jew in Zebulon.

"I understand," she said to Nuno, from the deepest recess of her brain.

Nuno's eyes solidified and drank in hers.

She had spoken to his spirit and knew she had touched it at its core. Her mother had been right. She had the power and had had it all along

"Please, Isabel," Rachel cried. "Open the door. This man has suffered enough. Take him through the portal into the light."

The door latch clacked in its strike. The colors of pastel landscapes leaked under the loosened door and ran like watercolors over damp paper. It spread across the landing, then began to grow upward rapidly, like a frenzy of climbing, heliotropic ivy. The creeping glow pulsed with the rhythm of a fetal heartbeat. Rachel looked at Nuno's profile, his sharp cheekbones, and his scorched face. She recoiled from a rush of sudden heat, as if she and the black angel were standing in the blazing sun with not a scrap of shade. Then came a sudden coolness and the musky smell of fresh rain. Petrichor, the fluid

that flows in the veins of the gods. Geosmin oils, leaching from evergreens and ozone.

The vapor rose and enveloped him. Nuno's sparks rose off his skin and skittered into the air and landed on the drapery, the floors. Tiny airborne flames popped and evaporated into the air like fireflies. At last he shrunk to a flaming ember. The smoke rose up and dispersed through the portal, pulled away on a breeze that ruffled the leaves of a never-ending stand of black locust trees.

A crescendo of chirping nightjars.

The last speck of Nuno lay smoking on the landing, a husk of coal. A small pair of white-gloved hands reached out for him.

"Thank you, Isabel," Rachel muttered.

Isabel carried him reverently into the closet and closed the door.



After a sleep that was far too short, Rachel sat in the morning on the living room sofa, her heart and mind caught in a tangle of emotions too complex to allow any but the blandest of expressions to cross her face. No, she didn't want coffee, or more sleep, or a sedative. Zack and Leo were upstairs, passed out in their beds, quiet as stones. That was a good thing. Dave was in the stables, checking out the horses, all of whom had returned to their stalls during the night and were waiting patiently to be fed.

"I don't know anything else." It was mostly true. She'd told them almost everything.

The two state policemen sent to interview her sat attentively in crisp blue uniforms. She hoped they'd respect her exhausted state and not press any supernatural issues. Fat chance.

"We believe that you're trying to tell the truth, ma'am," the younger one said.

He was a nice boy of twenty-one or twenty-two with a thin mustache obviously grown to make him look more mature. The older trooper looked to be in his fifties, with a face like a hatchet, but kind eyes. When he sipped coffee, he extended his little finger, as if he had been carefully taught to do so by a grandmother. Like her own mother always had.

She thought then of Beatricia and wept bitterly, picturing

her mother's collapse in the foyer and then, much later, the two EMTs lifting her onto a stretcher and carrying her sheet-covered body to the ambulance. Her face, in death, had been serene as a child's in sleep. As if Beatricia's spirit was conscious of having made a sacrifice for the Sheltons when it was most needed, and was pleased about it.

"Thank you, Mommy," Rachel said out loud, then dried her eyes.

The sheriff, Lev, and Creed had already been carried to the hospital to have their surface wounds patched. The sheriff, Lev, and Creed had already been carried to the hospital to have their surface wounds patched. The house seemed empty, despite the state troopers and men from the sheriff's department, as well as a medical examiner. Hours before, she and her family and friends had been cut off from the world. Now, a bit late in the game, the world had rushed to them. Even the local press was patrolling the farm with notepads and cameras. One reporter had to be restrained by the authorities from coming into the house.

"What I don't get is the failure of the phones," said the older trooper. "Why they didn't work when the ghosts got here, but then worked just fine when they were gone."

"It was the, uh, energy," said Rachel.

"I know what you said, ma'am but—"

"I guess you don't believe any of us."

"I didn't say that," he protested. "Everyone in the county knows something mighty strange has been going on in Zebulon. The whole place is deserted. These, the murders...peculiar."

She looked around the house. All of the furniture had been repositioned or overturned, and was sitting at odd angles or even upside down. All the doors were damaged, some just hanging from a single hinge. The windows were broken. Glass shards seemed to cover every inch of floor.

"There's burned clothes at every doorstep of the house," said the mustached trooper. "And piles of ash all over. Even worse, there're three deputies missing. Just don't know how the phones fixed themselves after being burned up."

A worm of terror worked itself into Rachel's mind.

"Maybe the deputies can fix themselves up, too," said the trooper."

“I don’t want to think about that,” said Rachel.

There was no reason to ruin the rest of her life worrying about the deputies coming back from the dead. It was unlikely their energies would find an enclosed space within which to seethe and magnify— through the power of animal magnetism.

“Is there anything else you can tell me?” said the trooper.

Rachel shook her head. No way was she going to mention Zack and Isabel’s love. Neither would the sheriff or Lev, or anyone else.

“I’ve told you everything,” Rachel said, as Dave, back from the stable, sat down beside her.

“Unless I miss my guess,” said the old trooper. “This isn’t going to blow over. Seven people dead, reports of ghosts, a deserted town, all on Passover. It’s going to be on the national news. Interviews, the press...probably a book, a movie...maybe a series on television. You’d better be prepared for the onslaught. Nothing’s going to be the same again.”

Dave wove his fingers through Rachel’s.

“Don’t want it to be the same,” Dave said. “She and I are together in this. We can handle everything from here on out.”

Outside the living room window, the sun was shining like it was the first day the world began. The horses grazed in the pasture. Slivovitz, Le Pouf, Queen Mary, Magistrate, Capitan Matepas, their silky silhouettes shining, noses deep in the high timothy. Beyond them ran a sixth horse, larger and more muscular than the others, his coppery coat casting off sunlight like oil sheds water. Powerful haunches propelled him forward as if he were about to leap from one world to the next with the exuberance of a thing newborn and the energy of a being that would live forever.

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“A mesmerizing mix of serial horror, religious mythology, and recent history. A contemporary supernatural thriller to stay up late and read, with the lights on.”

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On successive full moons, the firstborn sons of Zebulon, Virginia are being murdered house by house by a winged biblical horror, but the Shelton’s refuse to leave their home even as the tormented spirit attacks their blood-smeared doors and windows from the shadowy fires of Treblinka, Belsen, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Buchenwald, and Dachau. There are also an army of autonomic scarecrows whose fingers spout flames, skinheads and the Law of Ghosts to contend with. Neighbors fall one by one. Plagues afflict the town. Finally, only the Sheltons remain, their only hope a dedicated county sheriff, a grandmother’s occult wisdom, and deciphering a chain of supernatural phenomena.

Passover is both supernatural thriller and domestic drama. Can this trapped, dysfunctional family’s embittered members learn to work together in time to save themselves from evil?



Aphrodite Anagnost also writes as Frances Williams; her first novel is *Memoir of a Death Angel*. She’s been an actor and a horse trainer, and is now a country doctor and medical examiner in Virginia. She’s also an editor at *Xenophon Press* and a Rhode Island native. Her parents hosted Las Vegas acts there, in their barn-turned-restaurant, the Country Inn. *Passover* is set in her 1923 home in Franktown sharing the neighborhood with a house so haunted, paranormal investigators decline to show up without a priest.



Robert P. Arthur has published drama, fiction, and poetry. He’s won awards in all three genres. He grew up in a Virginia town not far from mythical Zebulon, and is a professor in the MFA creative writing program at Wilkes University. He lives in Virginia Beach.

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