

THE BECKONING DEAD: BOOK 3

THE  
HAUNTING  
OF WINSLOW  
MANOR



AMBROSE IBSEN

**THE HAUNTING OF  
WINSLOW MANOR**

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# AMBROSE IBSEN

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# CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Thank you for reading!

About the Author

“So... there’s no spare?” asked Rachel, combing a few blonde locks out of her face and peering down at the muddy hubcap.

Dan kicked the flattened tire with a grimace. “That *was* the spare.” Hands on his hips, he walked a few circuits around the sedan, surveying the distance. To the right, beyond a drainage ditch, was a hillock topped in great pines; to the left were vast open fields overgrown with weeds. The road that had brought them this far had offered nothing for miles, and—if his eyes could be trusted in scoping out the way ahead—would offer nothing for many miles more. The midday sun was of little aid; increasingly, the whole area was beginning to accumulate a thin, vaporous fog as the weather took a sudden turn for the sour. “We’re in the middle of *nowhere*.”

His girlfriend, reasonably nonchalant up till then, sidled up to him and asked, “Well, what can we do? Can we call someone for help?”

He reached into his pocket for his cell phone, but failed to locate it. Gritting his teeth, he threw open the driver’s side door and began rooting around for it on the car floor. “Who could we possibly call? Everyone we know is in Ohio—it’d take them a day or more to drive out here and find us. And I’m sure it’ll take ages for a tow truck or cab to show up, too.” He balled up a few candy wrappers in his fist and struck the dash. “I don’t know where my phone went. Can I use yours?”

Rachel drew out her phone, but then flushed with embarrassment. “Er... sorry, it’s dead,” she muttered.

“It’s *dead*? Did you bring a power bank? A charging cord?”

She shook her fair head solemnly.

“Of course!” Dan threw up his hands. “You just had to keep listening to your obnoxious music all the way out here, didn’t you—had to drain it completely. This is *great*.” With his foot, he slammed the door shut and cursed under his breath.

“Well... what about *you*?” she protested. “*You* forgot your phone back at the hotel, didn’t you?”

He waved her off with a scowl. “Yeah, well, maybe I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t waited to check out till the last possible moment. They practically chased us out of the room because you had to run down the clock with your bath! It’s a miracle we didn’t leave *all* our things behind!”

“Oh, so it’s all *my* fault?” She turned away from him. “I can’t believe you. What kind of dummy doesn’t keep a new spare tire in the trunk?”

He seethed quietly at the roadside, teeth grit, as thunder mounted in the distance. From the gunmetal clouds overhead there dripped a few cold drops. “And *now* it’s gonna rain. Excellent!” Wrenching open the trunk, he removed an old umbrella and a dingy camouflage jacket he kept always on hand. “Here,” he said, thrusting the umbrella at her. “I guess we’d better get walking.”

Rachel accepted it thanklessly and balanced it over one shoulder, gazing narrowly at the expanse of hills to their right. “Hey,” she said, wandering a few paces down the shoulder, “is that smoke?” She pointed well into the distance at a lone, writhing tendril of dark haze.

He spread out the jacket and held it over his head, joining her near the drainage ditch. “Could be... Maybe someone’s camping out there, in the hills?”

“Should we go and check?”

He nodded. “Beats waiting around out here. Maybe they’ll have a phone we can use. They might even be able to give us a lift.” Abandoning the car at the roadside, they hopped across the ditch and started toward the rolling hills, the raindrops growing fatter, colder and rapping out a steady drumbeat now.

The gradient steepened; fifty-odd feet from the road, the shaggy field began swelling upward till they had to dig their heels in and lean forward to climb. They had no shortage of close-growing firs and odorous cedars to cling to when the going got muddy and their feet began to slip in the rain-soaked mire. Clumps of wispy fog clung to the trunks and tree limbs, circled them like knots of spider’s silk. The air, only minutes ago summer-warm, had shifted a few degrees lower without notice. The sun fell almost completely out of view as the storm front surged in.

They neared the top, out of breath and red in the face for the unexpectedly arduous climb. As an afterthought, Dan reached out and offered Rachel a hand, tugging her to the summit of the hill. There, they discovered something unexpected. “Well, how about that?” he said.

Situated between a mass of several hills and barely in view thanks to an obnoxious proliferation of evergreens was a lone house. It stood two stories high and was of not unimpressive width. The thin column of smoke they’d seen rising into the sky issued from the chimney stack that jutted from the center of its dark roof—and from their current vantage point, this appeared to be the house’s only clear feature. All else was bathed in the shadow of towering pines.

“Now who do you suppose lives *there*?” asked Rachel, startled by a distant flash of lightning.

“Dunno. I can’t imagine living so far out of the way,” replied Dan, taking a few more steps and preparing to descend the other side of the muddy hill. “I don’t even see a car, do you?” As he went, he peered past the pillar-like trunks of the trees, tried divining the true shape of the house still masked in gloom, but it fast became clear it would only divulge its secrets to those who dared draw nearer. “Whatever. I’m sure they’ve at least got a landline we can use. C’mon.”



Rachel followed him, bracing herself against tree trunks to keep from tumbling down the hillside. From this or that angle she managed inconclusive glimpses of the remote house, though the growth became at times so dense that virtually none of it could be seen and she half-doubted there was a house there at all. “Is it... is it safe?” she asked, white-knuckling the umbrella.

“*Of course* it’s safe,” he answered derisively. “Country people are sweet. It’s not like we’re about to knock on Jack the Ripper’s door.” Here, he flashed a wolfish grin. “Then again, you never know. This could totally be like the Gacy house...”

“You... you really think so?” she asked, grinding to a halt.

“*No!* Come on, hurry up! I’m getting soaked.” Having reached the hill-bottom, Dan began trudging onto the marshy plateau where the house sat, the land having been transformed into soup by the churning rain. The jacket he held over his head had grown sodden, multiplied in weight, and cold water had long ago invaded his shoes and begun climbing up the legs of his jeans. He cursed the weather and tramped through the ankle-high water angrily, splashing as he went.

Rachel caught more than a fleeting glimpse of the house beyond the trees when the wind whipped through the hills and nudged aside the dripping branches for a moment—and what she saw through the keyhole the breeze had momentarily opened up left a curious dread perched in her gut.

The house appeared to be in *very* rough shape.

To begin with, the building had been extra difficult to see because it had a way of blending in with the surrounding greenery. Its walls were thoroughly ivy-grown, lending it something of the chameleonic in this forested setting. A bit of ivy, carefully manicured, could add some class to most any building, but this one had been almost completely overrun by it—wore it like a sweater. And what little was visible beneath the accumulation of leaves and vines looked quite threadbare indeed—mostly loose planks long-stripped of paint and blackened by the seasons. Met with the sight of a cracked, shadowed window, she wondered to herself whether anyone

could *really* live in such a ramshackle house; and she shuddered at imagining what such a homeowner might be like.

Dan, though, kept pushing through the murk, stooping beneath low-hanging branches till he'd broached the shallow forest and infiltrated the yard—or what little untamed greenery could be taken as such. Tangles of wild grass surrounded the ivy-wreathed house, the stringy blades stirred up into a furor by the pounding of the rain. To their right, up a set of concrete steps, was a sagging entryway supported by two columns that must have once been very picturesque, but which had long-since been choked by black vines.

He led the way, marching up and dropping his sodden jacket on the dirty stoop with a *plop*. Rachel followed—though not without some reservations—and climbed the half-dozen steps toward the front door. The entrance to the house was rather wide and stately, with a paneled door of thick wood whose stain had long ago faded and whose brittle hardware sagged in its sockets.

The state of the house, its utter decrepitude, had for some minutes prior been inciting a roiling unease in her, and as she idled on the porch, waiting for Dan to knock, she finally voiced it, whispering, “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. This place freaks me out. I don’t think anyone is living here... I mean, just look at it! It’s falling apart.”

Dan raised a fist to the door, unmoved. “It’s a little shabby, sure, but some people are into that.” He shrugged and planted a few firm knocks that set the ancient timber of the door rattling.

Quite apart from the constant patter of the rain and the vibrations of the ancient door in its frame, there entered into hearing something like hurried movement from somewhere within the house—perhaps a burst of motion across old floors, as of something reacting violently to their summons. Rachel braced herself at the noise, took hold of her boyfriend’s arm.

But moments passed without an answer.

He placed an ear to the door, then pounded on it afresh. “*Come on, come on,*” he muttered impatiently, wiping the rain

from his brow. The coolness of the breeze was once again intensified as the storm bore down and he absentmindedly clawed at his damp T-shirt with jittery hands.

Rachel moved away from him, to the bottom of the stairs, and inspected the exterior of the house with something like joy on her face. Far from being upset at the lack of an answer, she was rather pleased that no one had come to the door. “See? I don’t think there’s anyone here. We should go back to the car and—”

The words died on her lips, and with them went all traces of calm in her expression, for in one of the second story windows, she glimpsed a figure—a figure, she was certain, that hadn’t been there during her last pass of the tottering facade.

The pane was streaked in rain, which did much to obscure the shape now seated on its other side. The figure, very thin and wan, was pressed close to the glass—slumped or leaned there, as a doll might lean—and was so still that Rachel half-wondered whether it was a mannequin. Through the veil of rain could be seen long black hair that framed a delicate face. Of clear features, only a wide—*no*, an almost punch-drunk, *slack-jawed*—smile and staring eyes could be gleaned through the obscuring mist. At what this woman was staring, or to what she owed her evident amusement, was a mystery.

Dan thumped against the door once again, making the panels creak with every blow.

That was when they both heard it. The voice, a woman’s, came from inside the house. “*Come in, it’s open!*” was the cheery remark heard past the rain.

Rachel stiffened, her eyes remaining on that pale figure slumped against the upper story window. She was certain of two things as she stood there, at gaze—the first, that the voice had come from that very same window; the second, that the woman’s mouth had not moved in the slightest, for all that while her lips had remained curled back in a wild, tooth-baring grin.

At this invitation, Dan reached for the knob and prepared to enter.

“Wait!” blurted Rachel, seizing his arm. “Don’t! T-There’s a woman up there... in that window, and...” She had trouble forming the right words. Why had she been so unnerved by the woman upstairs—the woman who had just invited them into her home to seek shelter from the rain? In the hopes that Dan might better articulate the woman’s eeriness—and think better of entering this dubious abode—she dragged him back a few paces and pointed out the window above. “*There.*”

Shielding his face from the rain with a raised arm, he squinted at the window. Then, frowning, he grunted. “What’re you talking about?”

The window was empty. No sign remained of the pale, grinning figure that had slumped there only a moment ago.

From inside, the cheery voice made a reprise. “*The door’s open! Come on in!*”

More upset by her strange behavior than by anything he’d hitherto witnessed on the property, Dan shook free of Rachel’s grasp and approached the door, shoving it open.

The low, deep groan of the door coincided with a crash of thunder, the combined effect of which made her legs go weak. The ancient glass in the windows, the components of the unlit chandelier that hung lopsided from the shadowed foyer ceiling like a dead man, rattled for its passage. This latter item, a series of carefully-cut glass crystals, had been so overcome by spiders’ silk as to become a petrified mass, and it swiveled on its black, threadbare wiring in the breeze like an odious cocoon.

Dan stepped inside, little bothered by these sights, and peered about in the dim. “Thank you!” he called out, and his voice flowed into every adjacent room with little resistance, imposing on a weighty silence. At hearing his words vanish into the depths of the house in a series of degrading echoes, he tensed a little and peered to the right and left. “We, uh, got a flat,” he explained in a quieter tone. “Can we use your phone?”

Not wanting to be alone, Rachel crept into the house and took hold of her boyfriend's hand. Though nearly a minute had passed since his salutation, there had been no reply whatsoever from their yet-unseen hostess. In fact, save for the creakings of the old house, which was tried again and again by the furious wind, and the din of the rain, there had been no sounds at all. Between the swells of the storm, she trained her ears on this silence, awaiting footfalls or cordial replies—but none came.

The pair stood dripping in the foyer and shared a confused glance.

“You... you *did* hear that voice earlier, didn't you?” asked Dan with a vaguely sheepish grin. “It wasn't just me, right? Someone definitely told us to come inside?”

She nodded gravely. “Yeah, I heard it.”

He shrugged. “Maybe she's busy...” He took a few steps to the right, and something in one of the rooms beyond caught his eye. Nodding to Rachel, he wandered a little deeper in, to a dust-coated dining room. Six chairs surrounded a sturdy wooden table, and every nook and cranny of the set had been invaded by gossamer threads. The place settings had grown damp with mold. The inner walls had been pierced by the same black vines that coated the home's exterior, and several branched off across the plaster, leafless and vein-like.

It was a space further on—something of a sitting room—lit by the flickering yellows and oranges of a small fire, that had attracted him like a moth. He passed through the threshold and, quickly scanning the room, approached its simple hearth. This room, too, was in a rather bad way, boasting a mold-blackened settee, a toppled armchair and some few mildewed books left to fester in the wall-set shelves. The mantle was home to several dust-encrusted baubles of a curious sort—carved wooden boxes, sculpted figurines—and above it a framed painting made its home, marred by soot. The piece, a rolling European hillside, was of the commonest sort, and thanks to the accretion of filth upon the canvas it struck them as quite unappealing.

Dan knelt down beside the hearth and held his hands near the little fire that bumbled there, delighting in the warmth with a sigh. Rachel, though, remained anchored to the floor. Fire had lost its savor, and as she watched the stumpy logs burn, she was struck by nausea. The placement of this fire in so hideous a house felt like little more than a lure to her. They had taken the bait of warmth and shelter from the rain—but at what cost? Her head remained on a swivel and her ears kept combing the silence for signs of occupancy, but the doorways remained empty and the house stayed impossibly quiet.

“She must be tied up with something.” Dan rose, wiping his dusty palms on the legs of his jeans, and motioned back the way they’d come. “I’m gonna find her. It’s possible she didn’t hear us when we came in.”

Rachel met him with an incredulous glare. “You’re w-what?”

He tossed his shoulders and started past her. “I’m going to try and find her. I want to thank her, and to see if we can’t use her phone. I’m not trying to hang out here all day, you know?” He started back to the dining room, but caught a snag.

“*Don’t*,” she pleaded, taking his arm. “Let’s... let’s just get out of here.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, where to? Wanna go back to the car? You think the tire just reinflated itself while we were away?”

“Dan, I want to leave,” she insisted, scanning the dining room with a shudder.

“Sure, as soon as I call a cab or something, OK?” He looked her over with a frown, eyes narrowed with concern. “Just... just chill out here, next to the fire, will ya?” She began to shake her head, but he motioned back at the hearth. “No, I mean it. Warm up a little. I’m sure she’s just in the kitchen or something. I’ll see about using her phone and we can get out of here soon.” He stepped out of the room and his footfalls echoed through the dining room.

Rachel swayed on her feet as she sought to walk back toward the fire. She thought to follow him, or even to wait

outside on the porch, but her legs felt like jelly and her body was racked by shivers. She stood before the hearth, hands held out limply, but the blaze failed to chase out the chill in her bones.

Nothing about this house seemed right. It was *clearly* abandoned, not suitable to live in... and yet they'd both heard that pleasant voice calling them inside out of the rain. Despite having spent several minutes in the house, and having called out to the owner a few times, they'd encountered no one, however. *Someone* had started this fire—somewhat recently, by the looks of it—but she and Dan had seen no sign of them. And then, there had been that eerie figure in the upstairs window; there one moment and gone the next.

She was jarred suddenly from her thoughts—not by any noise or calamity, but because she noticed at that moment the incredible silence that'd once again settled over the entire house. Dan's footsteps had faded completely, leaving only the tomb-like quiet that had earlier prevailed. She turned an ear to the dining room, hoping to hear his voice, his step, but picked up only the howl of the wind and the popping of twigs in the fire.

“D-Dan?” she called out, though her voice wavered terribly.

Ten seconds elapsed, then twenty. No answer.

She smoothed out her hair compulsively, bit down on her lower lip. “Dan?” This time her voice was steadier, a little louder.

No reply reached her.

Seizing now with dread, she paced unsteadily across the room and stole a glance into the dinette. It remained empty.

*He's probably just a little lost, she told herself—though she didn't believe it a jot. He took a wrong turn, that's why it's taking him so long. He's still looking for the woman. Or maybe he found her and he's on the phone now! Her heart gladdened at this thought. I'll bet that's it! He's dialing a tow truck. We'll be out of here soon enough...*

And so, smoothing out her creased nerves, she strode back into the sitting room and soaked up what little she could of the hearth's warmth. As she stood there, she stared at the painting over the mantel, studied the careful brushstrokes that had gone into the trees and hills. The artist's initials adorned the lower right corner. Years of grime had obscured them a little, but after a short effort she read them as "A.S."

*CREAK.*

She turned back toward the dining room with a jolt as the floors deeper in the house yielded a sharp groan. Her breath hitched in her chest, but she stopped short of tumbling into panic. *It must be Dan*, she thought, and she started a slow creep across the room, peering once more at the table and chairs beyond the threshold.

The dinette was still empty, though. The creak had come from further on. She stood just inside the dining room, one hand on the filthy wall, and wondered if she hadn't merely heard the floors settle. When she'd taken a few moments to gather herself, she continued through the room and, peeking around the corner, looked into the foyer.

The foyer was darker than she recalled, and the reason why was immediately obvious. The front door had been shut. This struck her as strange, as she hadn't heard the thing close, and she knew that—in their entering the house to seek out its owner—they'd failed to shut it. But this was far from the most distressing thing she discovered around the corner. That dubious honor was reserved for something she spied further on.

Or, rather, *someone*.

In the room beyond the foyer—a murky little hovel, Rachel glimpsed a very pale woman standing in the darkness. This was, quite literally, all she seemed to be doing; the thin woman, with her back turned to Rachel and her long, black hair spilling down the back of her white garb, was rather invested in merely existing in this dark room. She stood stock-still, delicate hands held limp at her sides. So still was she that she didn't even appear to draw breath.



Though the woman had her back turned and was buried in the shadow of this other room, Rachel couldn't help but feel as though the woman's eyes were on her. Not a little spooked at the wan figure's odd behavior, Rachel cleared her throat, as if to announce herself and introduce a little normalcy. The woman, though, didn't react in the slightest. She remained ensconced in the darkness, not a hair on her head so much as shifting in the draft.

"Uh... thank you for letting us come in out of the rain," chanced Rachel, her voice barely daring to leave her throat. "Did... did my boyfriend find you?"

There was no reply. No movement. The mannequin-like woman remained frozen in place, wreathed in shadow.

Thoroughly unnerved now, Rachel drew back into the dining room, loosing a shaky sigh. *What's up with her? Why's she just standing there?*

No sooner had she looked away from the woman did the floors loose another terrible groan.

*CREAK.*

With a dull thud in her chest, Rachel slowly peered around the corner once more—and discovered that the pale woman now stood in the foyer. Save for that single creak of the floors, she'd moved in utter silence—and with unbelievable swiftness. Bafflingly however, she had come to the foyer simply to do what she'd done in the prior room—to stand in the darkness with her back turned to Rachel. There was hardly any light to see by—the daylight fought its way in through cracks here and there, and the dull fire-glow to her back offered just enough to make out her immediate surroundings.

Close as she was to the woman now, Rachel could make out a bit more of her despite the dark. She wore a plain dress—an old-fashioned thing that remained snow-white despite the decay of everything else in sight—and stood awkwardly, stiffly, like a marionette in storage. *Yes, she thought, that's what this woman is like. A living doll.*

The way out was barred to her—that is, unless she was willing to cross paths with the woman. The pale figure had done nothing to threaten her, had demonstrated no hostility whatsoever, and yet even in her placidity this strange woman exuded an almost incalculable malignity. Just the sight of her made Rachel’s heart gallop, made her stomach drop through the floor. She couldn’t muster a single step in her direction, much less walk past her to the door. Her legs simply wouldn’t obey.

Rachel hurriedly retreated back to the sitting room instead, and found that the fire was now inexplicably dying. She watched in confusion as the last embers were robbed of their glow and the entire hearth grew suddenly cold, as if no fire had ever burned there in the first place. This sight coincided with yet another terrible creak of the floors, and Rachel knew then that the woman was standing just out of sight, in the dining room.

“D-Dan!” she cried out, backing through the room, past the fireplace. “*Dan!*”

Her cries went unanswered, and her shoulders met one of the misshapen wooden shelves built into the wall behind her. She’d been backed into a corner.

“Dan, please! Come back!”

Her teary eyes zeroed in on the doorway leading to the dining room. Robbed of the firelight, the space she now stood in was so filled with velvety darkness that she could scarcely make out its borders. She cowered against the cobwebbed shelf, waiting for the woman to enter. Terrified, she begged, “Please, leave me alone! I just want to leave. P-Please, don’t hurt me!”

From her immediate left—close enough that she could taste the sour breath of the speaker—came a chuckling voice. “*You know... I’m starting to think there’s something wrong with this house...*”

The voice was Dan’s.

A bolt of lightning sprang across the storm-black heavens and the lights within Sadie's apartment grew momentarily dim. The flash was of such great brightness—and the boom of thunder that followed it so intense—that August was startled awake and left to pan blearily about the room.

The barrage of raindrops that struck the windowpanes sounded like ball bearings on the glass and the wild gusts of wind that surged past the building seemed poised to lift it off its foundations. It had been quite some time since Montpelier had played host to a storm of this ferocity.

“What’s up?” he groaned, looking to the window with a yawn. Then, at sighting the open box on her lap, he slowly sat upright. “Is that...”

“The box from my grandparents’ old place,” she replied.

“What’s in it?” He wiped at his eyes and moved to the opposite end of the sofa so as to peer inside.

The box’s meager dimensions were not filled out entirely by its contents; there was less in it than the parcel’s weight had led her to expect. The discrepancy almost fooled one into supposing that its heft came not directly from the things stored inside, but from a profound psychological weight that infused them.

Sadie began unloading the box, separating its contents atop the nearby side table. All told, there were a mere three items inside: A yellowed leather journal between whose pages were

crammed what appeared to be photographs and newspaper clippings, a manilla folder, and a lone floppy disk. A careful inspection of all three yielded no outward trace of their origins, no proof of ownership.

She carried these items to the sofa and plopped down beside him, combing a lock of hair behind her ear. “This looks to be everything,” she said.

August zeroed in on the floppy disk, taking it from the pile and toying with the metal cover. “I haven’t seen one of these in years,” he said. “Wonder what’s on it.”

Setting aside the manilla folder for the moment, Sadie focused on the leather journal. It had been shut with a tight-fitting rubber band whose substance had grown brittle after years of storage. She carefully looped a finger through it, and in attempting to ease it off the volume it suddenly crumbled in her palm. When she’d brushed the rubber fragments off her lap, she cracked the cover and sought some evidence that would bring to light the identity of its owner.

None existed, though—the inside cover was blank, save for the yellowing known to haunt old paper. At opening the little book, a hint of dust rose up from its pages, and in its earthiness she couldn’t help recalling the scents of long-abandoned places, whose aromas of late she had been all too acquainted with. She began with great care to flip through the slender volume, but no sooner had she begun to turn the pages did things slip from between them.

Photographs and newspaper clippings—these all appearing *much* older than the book that housed them—began to spill upon her knees. She gave the journal a shake, accumulating still more, and then began shaping the scramble into an orderly pile. “What is all this?” she muttered, setting down the journal and choosing to first study these shed contents.

August dragged the coffee table a bit closer so that she might spread them out. “Black and white pictures... and some old newsprint. I don’t suppose these were recipes clipped from the food section, eh?”

Sadie arranged them in neat rows; the newspaper trimmings on the left, the photographs on the right—and as she started placing the photos on the table she recognized certain of their subjects with a start.

Among the photos, aged and dogeared, was a black and white print of Rainier Asylum. Sadie pressed the photo onto the table with numb fingers and leaned over it in careful inspection. Any hopes that the contents of this box had nothing to do with their investigations were dashed at the finding of this photo—and doubly so when, later in the stack, a similar print featuring none other than the house on Beacon Hill surfaced.

Lightning broke the skies in two, and once again the lights grew dim. The bulbs in every fixture flickered as though on the verge of burning out, only to stabilize as the entire building took to shaking with the thunder. She felt the rumbling of the storm in her very bones, and even as the great crash receded, her body continued in subtle quaking, her flesh left a-tremble.

August looked between the two photos narrowly. “We’ve got Beacon Hill *and* Rainier Asylum?” He motioned to the other photos in her hand. “Looks like someone had a collection going—like someone was doing the same research as the two of us. Were they putting together a scrapbook of haunted spots, or what? What else did they snap pictures of?”

“I’m almost afraid to look,” she admitted. One by one, she set the remaining photos upon the table.

Before she’d even had the opportunity to calmly take in the outspread pictures or newspaper clippings, the lightning made a sudden reprise, and this time it struck at such a proximity, and with such fiery intensity, as to finally overpower the beleaguered appliances and render the bulbs dark.

The entirety of the apartment complex fell into shadow with a low, mechanical wheeze.

**T**heir survey of this new evidence would have been conducted by candlelight had Sadie been well-prepared for a blackout, but lacking candles they made due with the glow of August's cell phone and the flashlight he'd packed for their earlier trip to Rainier Asylum.

While they scanned and read in the almost total darkness, the raging storm outside waxing outrageously, there entered into her living room something of the unsettling. Sadie had nigh-perfect knowledge of this room's every corner and had no reason to fear it in darkness; what's more, she wasn't the kind to fear thunderstorms, either. But she felt she'd loosed something in opening the box—that the mere lifting of the lid had afforded freedom to something long shut-up and so constrained for good reason. She fancied her senses well-attuned to the goings-on of the paranormal sphere, and yet the presence that crawled and shambled through the blackened room just then eluded her every attempt at description. It was, her heartier faculties asserted, mere paranoia—but even this could not tire the niggling unease that came from handling the box's contents. It was robuster a dread than the circumstances should have afforded, and August, in his nervous perusal of the clippings and photos, seemed to share in this, fidgeting uncomfortably as he scanned the documents with a knit brow.

The room seemed to grow very small indeed in the darkness; the space shrank about them, enveloped them, till there was space enough solely for their hunched, studying forms and the appalling truths they uncovered in their

researches. Outside, the skies churned with such an intensity that a whorl opened up in them through which the moon and streaks of blinding lightning peered at turns. The very air vibrated for the ceaseless passage of the rain and infused the atmosphere with an autumnal coolness and damp.

The clippings, five all told, made for a tragic collection, and despite the space of decades, were each concerned with the same thing; that is, with incidents of the same unhappy stripe. Taken from periodicals across the State of Indiana and from issues spanning forty-odd years, the reports described disappearances of uncannily similar character.

In the case of Evelyn Renfield in 1947, as in the cases of Nora Tellier in 1962 and Stephanie Marsh in 1977, a new mother was found to have gone missing just days after giving birth, along with her infant. The aforementioned three women, who'd vanished unexpectedly with their newborns, were joined, too, by Candice Kellermeyer in 1986, with her own disappearance and that of her five-day-old son, Jack.

The circumstances in every case were eerily similar in every detail but the year of their occurrence. A woman, recently discharged from the hospital and having enjoyed a healthy birth, disappeared with her baby and was never heard from again—much to the shock and dismay of the public. Physical descriptions of these missing individuals were sparse: The women all appeared of a common cast—dark-haired, slender, uniformly youthful. Much-alike in age—early 20's—the women shared another characteristic in that they were all unwed mothers.

In each case, desperate searches were subsequently carried out into the whereabouts of mother and child. Even so, no indication was given that they had ever been found, nor that any significant inroads had been made toward locating them. None were charged in these disappearances, for it seemed in every instance the woman had gone off of her own volition. In the words of one interviewed acquaintance in the 1962 case of Nora Tellier, *"It's like they vanished into thin air—left no trace."*

A foul taste plagued Sadie's tongue as she read. Who had amassed these stories, and why? What connection did they have to the photos—specifically, to Rainier Asylum and Beacon Hill? While musing on these questions she was reminded of something in their prior reading concerning the habits of the cultists known to have occupied both sites. The debauched rites of those villains had dealt in the generation of suffering, and at the asylum four women and their newborn children had unaccountably disappeared.

Mothers and children had continued to disappear throughout the State, it seemed, long after Rainier Asylum had closed its doors—and though no outward evidence existed to definitively link these tragic disappearances to that accursed place and its horrors, Sadie couldn't help postulating such a link when appraising them in light of all she knew.

Her perusal of the journal itself proved a short affair, for she soon realized no few of its pages had been ripped free, leaving it substantially thinned; and of the ragged remainders, many were unfortunately blank. There were, in the scarce evidences of handwriting peppered through the slim hand-stitched volume, certain details that gave her pause, though—and which led her to study the thing with scientific closeness under the flashlight.

Before her mind had even begun to decipher the tight cursive, the distinctive flow of the script called to mind something familiar. It was the tendency of the L's to loop upward disproportionately like bunny ears, the characteristic scrawl of certain numerals, that led her to the realization she'd previously read words jotted by this precise hand—though not in some time. “I... I recognize this handwriting,” she uttered in near certainty, though in probing the depths of memory she hadn't yet struck upon the identity of the writer. “I know I've seen it before, but...”

The content of the jotted message was simply: *If something happens to me, call Marcus Halloran, 555-9838.*

Here, too, she found something she recognized. “Marcus Halloran?” The name rolled off her lips on the back end of a barely-checked gasp.



August leaned over and appraised the page himself. “Who’s that?”

Sadie was slow to respond, running a finger across the aged ballpoint scrawl. “He was... my old therapist,” she finally replied.

“He was the one your grandparents took you to see, right? The one who helped you stop seeing things after you’d spent time in the hospital? After your dad died?”

She nodded absently, seized by a tremor. “That’s right.” In the space of a final glance at the name and phone number, Sadie had become convinced of one thing. “And this... this is my dad’s handwriting.”

“Your dad’s?”

Her head managed something like another nod; it drooped on her neck, at least, as though weighed down by the fear and confusion that now sprang up within it. “I don’t understand this. Did my dad know that something was going to happen to him—that he was... going to die? And why did he want Dr. Halloran called in such an event?” she asked aloud. “I didn’t start seeing him till...” She trailed off. “My grandparents didn’t take me to see him till well after my father died. Did Dr. Halloran *know* my dad?”

To this question, August played perfectly the role of sounding board, offering whatever commonplace explanations he could. “Well, maybe he wanted to make sure you got help and looked into good therapists before he passed. It could be that he gave Halloran’s number to your grandparents, you know?” He paused. “Now that we’re on the subject, though, I’m thinking this fella might be a good person to talk to regarding this whole mess. You think the number’s still current?”

“I’m not sure.” She gave the handwriting another incredulous pass, the tattered journal in her hands having gained a significance at once sentimental and sinister. *This can’t be his handwriting, though, can it? What involvement could dad have had with all of this?* She felt the need to make certain and rose as if in a trance, feeling her way out of the

room, flashlight in hand. The dim recesses of the unit were filled out briefly in flashes of bluish lightning that stole in from behind the curtains.

Upon arriving in her room and rummaging under the bed, she drew out a plastic container that she used to store old keepsakes, and a few minutes of searching through it yielded precisely what she was looking for: A card she'd received from her father on her fifteenth birthday. She peered at the message he'd written inside, eyes moistening a touch as she compared it to the writing in the journal.

The samples matched—not that she'd ever been in serious doubt.

She replaced the card limply and returned to the sofa. “It’s his handwriting, I’m sure of it. My father must have been involved in this stuff,” she muttered, motioning to the photos on the table. “But he never breathed a word of it to me. I began having dreams, seeing things, and he never offered any explanations.”

“It seems he knew more about what was happening than he let on,” replied August. With a soft smile, he added, “I imagine he just wanted to protect you. He thought he could manage the problem and didn’t want to cause you undue worry. Talking to a teenager about all of this dark stuff would have been rough.”

She was of a very different mind, however, and began snatching up the materials on the table. Knowledge of her father’s apparent investigations into the matter of the cult had left her shaken. She wondered how much he’d known, but at the same time was too frightened to delve further into his researches lest her memories of him become warped by the association. *Dad spent time researching this stuff and never said a thing about it. What else did he omit? How much of what I’ve been told about my life, about my own history, can I really believe? For that matter, how much did my grandparents know?*

Sadie dumped the materials back into the box and quickly slammed the lid on. Launching the vessel onto her papasan

chair, she stationed herself on the sofa, arms crossed, listening to the rain and thunder. “I’ve had enough for tonight,” she said.

August looked longingly at the box, pointed to it. “Mind if I just take a peek, then?”

She shook her head. “I’d rather you not. I don’t want to talk about this stuff right now.”

“Yeah, but there could be some valuable info in there—”

“August,” she interjected, “I don’t want to discuss this anymore. All I’ve done recently is talk about cults and murders and spirits. And now I find out my dad may have been in on it the whole time? I’m... I’m over it. So much has happened recently to throw my whole life’s story into question that I don’t want to fully upend things just yet. I want to take a break, feel normal again.”

He looked poised to interrupt but, sensing her agitation, merely nodded.

“I was told my mother was dead,” she continued, rubbing at her eyes. “That wasn’t true, though. Or, at least, it wasn’t the entire truth. She’s still out there, and she’s looking for me. What else did my dad lie about?” She held out her arm, showcasing the black handprint on her flesh. “Did he know about those spirits and what they could do to me? Why didn’t he warn me? If he knew all about Beacon Hill and the asylum, why didn’t he explain these things to me instead of just moving me in with my grandparents?” Sadie loosed a shaky sigh. “I feel like my entire life is a lie, something made up for his convenience.”

“Well, maybe the answer is in there,” he said, nodding toward the box.

“Maybe it is,” she admitted. “But I’m not sure I’m ready for that answer. I may not be happy with it, you know?” She leaned back, stared at the dark ceiling.

The lights came on suddenly, flooding the room in uncomfortable brightness.

August squinted and made his way off the sofa with a yawn. “I get where you’re coming from. Whenever you’re ready, we can dive into that stuff. Or, if you really want, I’ll pitch it into the dumpster for you. Your call.”

She was tempted by the offer, though destroying the contents of the box seemed too careless a course of action even in her weary state. “No, leave it. I... I just need to get my head on straight before I start back into this. I want to have a good night’s sleep—a day or two of just getting back to normal.” Even as she voiced these desires, she couldn’t help wondering if her attainment of such things was remotely possible under the circumstances. “Maybe I can catch up on my reading... try and forget about what happened today. Then, when I’ve had a chance to...”

“I hear ya,” said August, grabbing up his backpack. “I suppose I’ll see you later, for work?”

She frowned. “You might not,” was her reply. “I don’t feel up to the job right now. I think I might use a few more sick days—just till I have my feet under me.”

He chuckled nervously, starting toward the door. “Sure, sure, but... if you push your luck too hard and call off for a week, the boss isn’t gonna like it. Maybe ask her if you can do a leave of absence or something. Delores did one of those last year, when she was recovering from surgery. All she needed was a doctor’s note.” He grinned, singled out the box. “Maybe give Dr. Halloran a jingle,” he continued. “He can write you a note, and at the same time you can have a chat about the good ol’ days.”

She rolled her eyes and followed him to the door. “The good old days may not have been so good after all,” she replied. “But the leave of absence is a good idea. Thanks, August.”

With a wave, he slipped out of the apartment and climbed noisily down the stairs.

Scarcely wanting to touch it, Sadie picked up the box, carried it to her room and shoved it under her bed. Eventually, she knew, she’d find the nerve to open it—even if it blew her

entire life wide open—but tonight she wanted nothing more than to resume business as usual. She straightened out the bedskirt in an effort to block the vessel completely from view and did her best to put the matter out of her mind.

**T**here could be no returning to normalcy. From the moment she'd made the decision to shut the box and stash it away under her bed, she'd known it to be futile. In doing so, she was merely prolonging her own anguish—merely kicking the can a little further down the road.

Regardless, an all-consuming fear that her quarter century of existence had been a sham kept her from diving back into her research, and she committed herself to the motions of everyday life as best she could for a brief while. It was all a form of play-acting, but even little things like channel-surfing and taking a bath proved somewhat soothing in those rare moments when she turned her thoughts from the ghastly matters that'd filled her recent days.

Hers was a forced peacefulness—the kind of restlessness one feels before going off to war. That was what it felt like; soon, she would have to re-enter the fray whether she liked it or not. A retreat into ignorance was impossible after all she'd been through.

After August had left, she'd waited for the sounds of thunder to sufficiently fade before running a hot bath and taking a lengthy soak. She took the opportunity to use some old bath salts, making the exercise all the more indulgent. Steeping till she grew pruny, Sadie emerged from the lukewarm bath feeling nothing much in particular. A late evening meal of cheese, crackers and salad that her groaning gut assured her she needed went down without a fight, but

failed to impart much, save an occasional fright that it might return up her throat.

She slept—or, *tried* to sleep—and when her morning alarm went off she dialed Marsha, the library director, immediately. The terrible grogginess haunting her tone added some substance to her claim that she wasn't feeling up to work that morning, and after a barrage of canned apologies her off-day was granted. The makeup of her schedule had been such that, in combination with the present sick-day, she found herself on the verge of a three-day break in total.

The first was largely spent in grasping at the edges of a sleep that flirted with her but never stayed put. With little to gain by lingering in bed much longer, she rose in mid-afternoon and force-fed herself a small bowl of cereal, feigned interest in the day's headlines and half-heartily replied to a text message from August asking if "*everything*" was "*OK*".

"*Sure,*" was all she'd been able to reply, though if she'd been a little less morose she might've sent him a novel outlining precisely how "*everything*" was, in fact, the antithesis of "*OK*". Slumping at the kitchen counter and setting her phone down with a clatter, she couldn't hold back a dark chuckle at such a silly question. *Me? Oh, I've been cursed with the ability to see the dead, and they're coming after me so that I might be reunited with a demon that wears my mother's skin. My dad knew all about it and never thought to explain things or warn me. I'm just chipper.*

~

*DIAL THE NUMBER. You'll feel much better when you've done it.*

Boredom had taken its toll, and Sadie had done a little sleuth work. She'd dug up a cell number supposedly belonging to John Ford, the farmhand who'd vanished at the Gust Berkshire piggery—the one she'd met, or *thought* she'd met, in Rainier Asylum's remotest chambers. It hadn't taken much effort, all told; the number had been listed on one of his social media profiles, accidentally left visible to the public. She'd jotted it down and had dialed the first few digits, thinking it would be nice to know that, in all actuality, he'd survived.

But she couldn't find it in herself to place the call.

*What if it isn't him on the line? What if... someone else picks up?* She had, in the asylum sewers, encountered John's spirit and even happened upon his withered corpse. The air and darkness of that long-abandoned madhouse had muddied her perception, and doubts lingered about the things she had seen there. Had she really met him, or had it been nothing but a dark dream in those miserable halls? Could her stumbling upon his corpse have been a hallucination? Reason told her it was so; that she had merely been mistaken and that John had turned up safe and sound. The news had reported as much; he'd allegedly met with police and the search for him had been called off as a result.

Even so, she couldn't believe it until she heard his voice with her own ears.

Her thumb hovered over the final digit, an icy dread seeming to freeze it in place.

*Let's assume you can trust your own eyes. Let's assume John really is dead, that you did speak to his ghost, find his body, in the asylum... Then who met up with the authorities? Who did the news report as having safely returned if not the real John Ford? An imposter? Who's going to pick up the phone when you hit 'send'?*

Sadie tucked the phone back into her pocket.

*Forget it.*

~

SHE STOOD in front of the bathroom mirror as though in a trance, eyeing herself under hooded lids, mouth tightening gradually into a sour grimace bereft totally of trust in the reflection she now appraised. Sadie looked away after several moments, sure that her lips couldn't weather the tension any longer, the corners of her mouth fitted with jagged frown lines.

“Just who are you?” she muttered—and she said it in so accusatory a tone a third party might have thought her speaking to a home invader. The smooth black hair, the bright eyes, the ears that terminated in a faint point—these were the



same features she'd worn her entire life, but in the past twenty-four hours something had radically shifted. She could no longer see herself in these details—she'd been eclipsed by someone else.

*Her.*

Sadie's mother had passed on certain characteristics to her; the same smooth, dark hair, the same ears and nose. They varied in the eyes and mouth, though in the former it was merely a matter of color and intensity that separated them. Where similarities existed however, Sadie couldn't help feeling with a lurch in her gut that her mother had worn these shared features *better*—that her very appearance was some cheap knock-off, a degraded simulacrum of the original.

She had never known her mother, and if any proper memory of the woman prior to the past few days lingered on in some cobwebbed corner of her psyche, it was of the most primordial, inexpressible sort. How strange it was to have ripened in a woman's womb only to grow up and regard her a stranger. The way it had been told to her, the delivery had been a tragedy—the physical complications too traumatic—and her mother had perished before young Sadie had even been able to nurse at her breast.

And perhaps it was so—even in the boldest of lies there is often a kernel of truth dormant. It was by the imposition upon such small truths that charismatic lies found the most purchase, and she had little doubt that this version of events, fed to her occasionally over the course of years by her father, offered vague insights into the reality. But she could no longer be placated by occasional glimpses, by mere fragments of the truth. She coveted the whole thing, sought to digest it in its entirety like a serpent gobbling a bird's egg.

She moved from the bathroom, eager to scrutinize something other than her own features and cast a glance through the living room window at the windblown courtyard, still host to large pools of sitting water due to the storm of the evening previous, upon which there shone a hazy sun. Her eyes traced the trunks of the scattered trees, followed the sway

of their leaves for a time, as she wondered whether it was safe to leave the apartment.

Within these walls, the only phantoms she'd had to worry about were those plaguing her memory. The outside world, though—in its dark recesses, its lonely stretches—was host to those spectral things that even then were likely fixing their snouts on the breeze in the hopes of catching her scent. To leave the apartment would introduce a succession of unpredictable variables to the mix—would inject little-needed *danger* into her life.

And yet...

She peered down the hall, eyes seeming to hook around the corner in search of the box she'd crammed under her bed.

*If you stay here, you're going to be trapped inside with that.*

It was a curious mood that gripped her, a mood that picked her up by the scruff and dragged her back and forth between the extremities of apathy and mania without surcease. The more she paced and brooded the darker her thoughts became—and the darker her thoughts became the more she came to realize that she needed to change course, to dig deeper into the mysteries clouding her life. Only then might she strike upon the answers to her questions. A nauseating dread accompanied every pass of the urge, and its perennial message was the same: *Sure, look in the box... but you may not like what you find. In fact, everything you know and love may have been built on a lie. Are you ready for that?*

The answer to this final query remained “no”, and so she continued to put it off—and yet again kickstarted the cycle of brooding and consternation. She paced between the rooms of her apartment like a prisoner, gaze riveted to the carpet as if in search of reassurance amid the fibers. Sadie had only to pass by the door to her room to feel the weight of that cardboard vessel infringing upon the atmosphere. One of its corners had evaded the scope of the bedskirt and stuck out some few inches in seeming obstinance.

On the verge of tearing out her hair, she made up her mind to leave. *If you stay, you're going to lose your mind. If you go, get away from the box, maybe you'll be able to relax. Anyway, it's daytime—plenty of sun left in the sky. With any luck, you won't encounter any of those terrible things...*

She stepped into her shoes, snatched her purse off the counter and—not without some apprehension—exited the apartment. She had no destination in mind as she locked the door and trudged downstairs, but finding the day agreeable, she began down the sidewalk in the direction of town.

She had wandered to a bar, of all places, and chased her troubles with higher-proof fare than she was used to. It was early in the day, leaving the whole of the little establishment to her and the barkeep, and lending her the appearance of a determined alcoholic. Chin propped in hand, glazed eyes swiping from one end of the massive mirror behind the bar to the other, she listened to the tinny boombox radio and watched the slow flow of pedestrians through the nearby window.

Sadie drank slowly, so as not to overwhelm herself. Lightweight that she was, it didn't take a whole lot, and when the barkeep came out from the back room to see how she was doing, she asked him for an extra pour of orange juice for her screwdriver. "Funny," he'd said, obliging, "people usually ask me for more of the vodka."

To her surprise, it didn't feel good to be out in the world. She'd expected her flight from the apartment to provide some great boost to morale, but in reality the trouble had only tagged along. She felt as though she had the cardboard box—and all the horrors its contents promised—on her shoulders as she slumped and sipped. There was no telling what she'd do once her glass ran empty. Her listless eyes roamed about the sidewalks, searching for something of interest in the strip-mall scenery.

For a little while, she was content enough to people-watch. How many dozens of passersby did she witness strolling carelessly by the bar, or walking into the buildings across the

street? She envied them their normalcy, wished her life were as dull and generic as theirs appeared at a glance. She was filled with a certain bitterness, felt like she'd just received a terminal diagnosis, while everyone around her couldn't help but parade their vitality.

She watched a mother and child walking hand-in-hand across the way, an elderly couple carrying grocery bags to their car, and a middle-aged gentleman in a suit idling at a crosswalk, waiting for the signal to change.

But there was one individual she laid eyes on, around the time she'd reached the tail-end of her screwdriver, that drew her attention more than the others, and introduced queasiness where only boozy warmth had been spreading moments before. This particular pedestrian, a youngish man by the looks of it, was conspicuous strictly for his lack of movement. He had come out, it seemed, from between a narrow space between two shop buildings, and was standing on the sidewalk, almost directly across from the window she presently stared through. Activity on the street didn't wane; cars kept passing, people continued walking by, but this person remained still, right where he was.

The subject in which her gaze was so wrapped up was rather nondescript—brown-haired, clad in the jeans and baggy T-shirt that may as well have been the standard-issue uniform of all college-aged men—but he simply stood and stared across the street with an intensity that struck her as profound even from afar. He hadn't paused in that spot to check his phone, to tie his shoe or have a smoke. He was just standing, hands at his sides, steely gaze fixed straight ahead.

He looked, she couldn't help but notice, like John Ford, the farmhand.

The warmth of her cheeks was redoubled when she realized *she* was the focus of his stare, though rather than inspiring flattery, his behavior incited an inscrutable fear. Sadie found herself meeting that gaze with a furrowed brow, trying to deduce the meaning behind it. The barkeeper carried a crate of glasses into the back room and turned up his radio a click, the spotty transmission fading in and out during a cover

of “The Girl From Ipanema” that made the aged speakers crackle.

In the middle of the first verse, the signal must have cut out rather abruptly, for in the space of a few bars another broadcast came in momentarily—and this brief change in the music was noted with a shudder, because to Sadie’s ear it sounded all too familiar.

It might have been a clip from an audio drama or something of the kind, but the chorus of wails that began issuing from the speakers raised gooseflesh up and down her neck before she’d even had a chance to process the sounds. Groans and gasping sobs together streamed from the chintzy boombox, along with a single call of “*Aiuto!*” Her ears perked up at these familiar cries, and she turned in a frenzy of terror to the boombox, which cut back suddenly to the breezy tune.

When she looked back through the window, clutching her glass in hand, there was no sign of the young man any longer—though the weight of his stare persisted. She sucked down the remainder of her drink and ordered a second—*not* that she touched it. She hung around the bar till the drink grew warm, staring out the window, waiting for John to re-materialize, and wondering whether it was safe for her to leave.

~

TIRED FEET MAKE for unreliable guides.

An hour—then two—of side-stepping puddles, of shuffling down this and that thoroughfare, of navigating nameless segues, brought her to a portion of downtown Montpelier with which she had only a passing acquaintance. The larger buildings, the clustered banks of shops and posh eateries to her back, she now faced a quadrant of town that was half-residential and half-commercial; a visually disagreeable smattering of one and two-story homes scattered amidst such hoary local standbys as a barbershop, a minuscule post office, a used bookshop, a coin laundry and a delicatessen.

The way there had been a blur; she’d covered miles and she’d done it aimlessly, her mind running over with reminiscences and vague emotional stirrings. There’d been no room in that

addled head for anything like planning or direction—she just as easily might've found herself standing on the shoulder of the freeway. It had only been a tenuous psychical connection to her surroundings that'd informed her caprice; a dreamy half-knowledge of the landmarks she glimpsed while on her languid parade, and of their associations to her own past.

The sight of that barbershop, for instance, had reminded her of her father.

Once, as a girl of eight or nine, she'd accompanied her father to just such a barbershop, where he'd had his beard trimmed and his signature crew-cut touched up. She'd fidgeted in the waiting area as little girls are wont to do, and when the job was done, she'd complimented her father on his clean new look.

It had been such a small scene, perhaps a trivial one in the grand scheme of things, but the mere remembrance had almost toppled her with an incommensurate nostalgia that rapidly degraded into nothing but bald terror. She couldn't savor the simple sweetness of that memory because she could no longer claim any sisterhood with the little girl featured in it. That little girl in the barbershop, flipping through magazines and asking impudent questions, had been an imposter and she'd never even known it.

The sight of the yellow two-story across the street, with its squat pines out front and its gravel drive reminded her of the house she'd grown up in with her father. Theirs had had a beige exterior, and the drive had been of flaking asphalt, but eerily, the parallels far outnumbered the differences in this case. Her summer days had been spent attempting to climb those low-growing trees, her hands coated in resin, elbows and knees scraped by bark. Those few patches of the old drive that'd remained intact had been used as a canvas for her chalk drawings, and many had been the hours spent peering into the sewer at the curb in search of lost treasures.

Such was her visceral disgust at these similarities that Sadie couldn't help but jog past, her lungs tightening and breath becoming sparse. She felt herself an intruder in the memories of that little girl, fraud that she was. That happiness

had never belonged to her, had never *really* been hers. It had only been an illusion meant to mask the horror of her birth. Had that little girl known she'd been a devil's spawn, could she have been so carefree, so joyful?

Hunger and thirst came after her as she stumbled past a diner, a convenience store, but she let them nip at her heels unheeded, marveling instead at the knot of verdant green that marked the entrance to a large public garden. The quake of every branch and flower and thorn in the breeze dredged up still more of her inauthentic girlhood and summoned besides a stinging torrent of tears that she failed to massage back into her eyes.

As regarded hobbies, her father had practiced very few, but the man had always been fond of long walks in nature. Days off from school in the spring, summer and autumn had seen them explore parks and gardens hand-in-hand. Pressed between the pages of old books in that bin of mementos under her bed were leaves and flowers picked during such excursions—relics of an upbringing she'd taken for granted.

It had all been robbed from her. Every memory, every kindness had been sapped of meaning and injected instead with duplicity. Her father, her grandparents, had taken care of her, had claimed to love her, but she now found herself asking whether that had really been the case—for what was love when divorced from truth? However well-intended their obscuring of her origins, had they not foreseen the tremendous toll the truth might one day take on her, the immense pain it would exact?

Sadie was wounded by decades of dishonesty, and doubly so in finally understanding where it was she came from. She was not the daughter of a kind young couple, the fairer half of which had tragically perished during childbirth. “Sadie Young” was a role she'd been conditioned to play, a name given to the thing that had crawled from a demon's womb—nothing more. She had been fed and housed and clothed by her elders, and for years they had struggled to withhold any mention of the diabolical stock from which she'd sprung,



offering her instead a commonplace tragedy that was cheery by comparison.

She could have lived happily enough, believing that her mother had been a good woman who'd gone too young. But now the truth had begun to ooze out from behind the seams of this long-held lie. Her mother had never died—and was, in a sense, no woman at all. The figure she had longingly beheld in old photos as “mother” was the same which presently hunted her in the shadows with all her spectral beckoners, the same that had scrambled the mind of a teenaged girl and plunged her into a suicidal state, the same that danced in unquenchable hellfire and engorged itself on the suffering of others.

As if wishing to be cleansed of this association—as if sunlight alone could purge the darkness lingering in her blood—she bared her face, her handprinted forearm, to the hazy midday sun, and dropping down onto a bench she shook and wept.

Save for her monstrous mother, she had no remaining family.

Her grandparents were both gone; her father had been gone longer still. She had no siblings, cousins or surviving relations in the area that she knew of. Hers had been an insular upbringing, though it hadn't been till very recently, when she'd fallen into crisis and yearned for the company of her kind, that she'd realized just how desolate a life she'd led up to that point. Friends had been few and were now far-flung. If not for August and the regular patrons she dealt with at the library, she might have lived out most of her days without uttering a single word to anyone.

It was this moment of self-pity and desperation that drew her mind back to recent affairs—and which highlighted the importance of a meeting she had hitherto sought to delay. Links to her past were vanishingly few, and yet it was just barely possible that one remained!

As a teen, her grandparents had taken her to see a doctor by the name of Halloran; a kind and pleasant man who'd administered a number of treatments intended to help her out

of her baffling condition. When his work had been completed, she'd stopped seeing the dead and she had been naive enough to believe that she'd never see them again. Her memories of the doctor were hazy, but she recalled him as a good man, patient and learned, and though she'd been shaken at finding his name in her father's journal, the connection now invited a strange comfort.

Maybe Halloran would remember her; maybe, he'd even remember her father. There was no telling what kinds of insights he could offer into her past, what sorts of answers he could give regarding the troubles that presently plagued her, but it was all she could do to pin her hopes on this figure who represented the only standing pillar of familiarity in her increasingly sordid life. Perhaps, in that way particular to doctors and psychologists, he would tell her that everything was, in fact, going to be OK—and *maybe* she could find it in herself to believe him.

The night before, she had sworn off her researches, had decided to forego any further probing into her past until such time as she could do so with measured calm. But even at this, Sadie had been a failure.

“...**T**hey will speak in your voice, see with your eyes. They are confined here, lest they die...”

Rachel stirred, emerging from a coma-like slumber. Something rough had been placed around her eyes, blocking her sight, and a terrible stiffness assailed her every joint. She could hardly stir, her body bone-cold and sluggish, and though she strained to listen to the voice—that of an older man—she drifted in and out a few times, missing much. The air was warm and thick, but it failed to thaw her icy skin.

“...they are well secured. Nothing leaves this house without my allowing it... Even the birds can't find their way to the open air...”

She began to struggle; weakly at first, then with sufficient gusto to draw the attention of her captor. Her arms were not merely sluggish, she discovered—they'd been bound. No sooner had she realized this did something enter into hearing that spurred her to confused action.

A familiar voice, whimpering.

*Dan? Did something happen to Dan?* These were her first coherent thoughts as she sucked in a deep breath and began twisting her wrists against the thin ropes that bound them. She felt the hard seat beneath her, smelt a curious mixture of wood fire and rot, but try as she might to reach up to her face and tear away the blindfold, she could not. Her hands had been secured to one of the chair legs by a separate thread, it seemed, limiting her reach.

“W-Where am I?” she managed to choke out when all else in the room had fallen silent. “Who’s there?”

There was no reply, but the air was heavy with the presence of others and she knew she was being watched.

Rachel cocked her head to the side and shrugged her shoulders, attempting to bump the blindfold from one of her eyes. In this, she managed to tug it very slightly onto her cheek, which allowed her right eye to peer just over the edge of the rough, dark material.

The sight—when her eye finally adjusted to the murk—was bewildering, however.

They were in a room which featured no natural light—a room, it seemed to her, plucked from the set of some fantasy-action film, with stone floors and walls, numerous shelves filled with mysterious, leather-bound books, and a furnace glowing eerily some feet away. It looked—and felt—like a dungeon.

Seated across from her, bound with his hands behind his back, was Dan. His head lolled from side to side and a thread of fresh blood crawled down his chin. He was breathing hard, drenched in sweat, now and then loosing panicked noises like a kicked dog.

The older man she’d heard speaking only moments ago was nowhere in sight, however—and she hadn’t heard him leave, either.

She turned to Dan’s left and saw an empty wheelchair parked near the furnace. Immediately before the furnace, seated on the floor and hands held out toward the blaze as if in enjoyment of the warmth, was a lone woman—very pale and garbed in white.

Everything came back to Rachel at once.

They’d entered the house. They’d been separated. The woman had come for her from the dark interior and she’d lost consciousness while cowering.

Dan suddenly sat upright, seized by a coughing fit, and sent a spray of dark blood across the thin rug. As he struggled

to regain his breath, he looked at Rachel, eyes utterly vacant, chest heaving and jaw slack. Through his open lips, she could tell he'd been injured—he was bleeding profusely from the mouth or throat—but it was too dim to say precisely how.

The woman suddenly stood up. She moved with incredible grace, rising in a single movement with no visible effort and striding silently over to Dan. For his part, he didn't react to the woman's presence—it was like he'd been dumbstruck, overwhelmed by pain.

It was a strange thing to admit under the circumstances, but the pale woman in white was absolutely beautiful to Rachel's eye. Her lily-white skin was perfect and clear, and her smooth, black hair reached past her shoulders. Her ears had a slight point to them, and her facial features—possibly enhanced by the glow of the fire—were as delicate as a doll's. Her heart had sprung up in fear at seeing the woman stand, but catching a glimpse of her face for the first time, she found herself distracted by its immense beauty.

“W-Where are we?” coughed out Rachel, her nose twitching and the blindfold slipping a little further down her face.

The woman didn't reply. Instead, she stood before Dan, placed a hand gingerly upon his chin, and then bent over him, planting a firm kiss on his gore-slick lips.

Rachel startled, then felt the first stirrings of rage. “W-What're you doing?”

The woman didn't move—in fact, she remained in place as if she'd anchored herself to Dan's mouth.

Dan, though, reacted violently to her kiss. His legs, hitherto fidgeting and limp, shot out across the floor, heels digging in, as though he were in incredible pain. His bound hands writhed, fingers digging into the wood of the chair and his once-vacant eyes now widening in raw terror.

“Hey!” shouted Rachel, stamping her foot against the floor. “Leave him alone!”

The woman complied, after a few moments. She stood upright and returned to her spot before the fire, basking in the warmth without a word, as if nothing had happened.

Rachel looked to her boyfriend as he leaned forward and panted, red lips quivering.

“Are you... are you OK?” she asked him, straining against her bonds. She turned and looked to her back, finding only darkness. She studied the floor at her feet, hoping to find something that might aid her escape, and then looked back at the pale woman, who, still facing the furnace and luxuriating in its warmth, had begun to speak.

“Tell me, did you have a nice rest?” asked the woman.

At this, Rachel grew livid. “What kind of question is that? Let me out of here! Why are you doing this to us?” She rocked forward, nearly toppled the chair and fell on her face. “Let us go!”

Something strange happened as the woman replied—something that left Rachel silent and confused. “Soon you will sleep again...”

Agitated as she was in the chair, Rachel had glimpsed the side of the woman’s face as she’d spoken—but had noticed no movement whatsoever in her lips. It was as if the voice had come from thin air, or been transmitted directly into her brain. She turned to Dan with pleading eyes, and asked, “What’s she going to do to us?”

To her horror, Dan looked up at her and offered a red, dreamy smile. “This time,” he replied—not in his voice, but in the *woman’s*—“you will sleep, and never awaken from the nightmare.” His eyes gave off a cruel gleam in the firelight that she’d never seen in them before.

She looked back to the furnace and found the pale woman was no longer in sight. No sooner had she realized her absence was Rachel seized suddenly from behind. Two pale, cold hands covered her eyes.

Though her eyes were blocked, she began to see things as if they were open.

Horrific things—scenes of fire and ruin, scenes of suffering and foulness.

And when the hands were moved and she was able to open her eyes, she no longer saw the dim stone room—no longer saw the bookshelves, the furnace, nor Dan.

The hellish scenery remained no matter how many times she blinked, only growing in intensity.

She began to scream—just one anguished voice in a chorus.

She had lingered on the street-side bench long enough to involve herself in some concerted web searches, and these had given her an address that corresponded, she felt reasonably sure, to the appointments of her youth that Doctor Halloran had been kind enough to host in his own home. There were phone numbers on file, though they differed from the one in the journal. Seeing as how this sensitive matter was better suited to face-to-face discussion, she forewent the awkward phone calls altogether, dialed a cab, and asked for a lift to Laurel Street.

There was a problem, though.

These web searches had brought to light the existence and presumed whereabouts of mister Marcus Halloran, but no amount of digging could turn up a single instance of a *doctor* by this name in the Montpelier area. She'd been as thorough as possible with the tools at her disposal, even paging through old medical listings for area psychology outfits dating back thirty years and seeking out the name in the published literature of local medical conventions, but could find no proof that any MD, DO or even PhD named Marcus Halloran had ever existed or practiced—legally, at least—in Indiana. This left her not a little perplexed.

Perhaps there was a reasonable explanation for this. It'd been a long time since she'd been a patient of his; maybe Halloran had since given up medicine. It was possible, too, that he ran a private practice and that technological illiteracy



kept him from keeping a website or online presence as was now the norm among physicians.

Then again, it was possible that *Doctor Halloran* was just another lie waiting to confront her.

She grew increasingly agitated as the cab wound down the road. Sadie tried not to think about this new development, told herself it was nothing, but by the time the driver let her out a half-mile from the spot, she'd been given over to serious doubts about this plan of hers. She thanked the cabbie, paid him, and stumbled out in a daze.

The moist air was burdened with neither warmth nor chill but something more ambiguous, and the wind, when it passed through in its rare gusts, was scented by the sopping needles of nearby pines and the stench of newly-lain mulch. When she'd found her bearings, she staggered down the street in search of the doctor's place, hoping beyond hope that he was home, that he'd be happy to see her, and that he'd give her something positive to hold onto in this moment when everything was drenched in black.

Halloran lived in an unassuming little house at the far end of Laurel Street; a brick-fronted one-story thing with a large picture window and a concrete stoop. She appraised it from afar, taking care to study its exterior for signs of life. It was an ultimately unremarkable construction, fitting in quite naturally amongst its commonplace suburban fellows, though as she neared it she couldn't help noticing that certain of its gutters sat askew, and that the railing along the right side of the stoop had become orange with rust. There was no car in its slender drive, and if the dewy weeds that sprung forth from its gravel-choked crannies were any indicator, no vehicle had tread there in a very long while.

This was not to say that there were no evidences of life there, however. No—though scarce, there entered into view certain signs that the home was lived in. White lace curtains dyed yellow by dust and sunlight remained in that large front window, and a blue plastic bag—containing what appeared to be a newspaper—sat mere inches from the front walkway where a paperboy had only hours ago launched it. The house

was possessed of a crooked chimney stack, and the edges of the upper bricks were black for the soot of recent fires.

Sadie paced up the drive and soaked it all in. She'd probably visited this house five or more times for treatment, though more than ten years had passed and her careful study of the place yielded nothing whatsoever of the familiar. She recognized neither the shaggy willow that peeked over the roof from the back yard, nor the neat whitish bricks that led up to the front door. The door itself was a red, glossy, paneled thing with a brassy knob, and the storm door preceding it sported a hairline fracture in the upper-left corner where repeated slamming into a weather-warped frame had taken its toll. The grass was neither long nor short; the marigolds in the stoop-side planter neither flourished nor wilted. All of this, to the very last detail, was foreign to her.

There was no telling how she'd be received; since their last meeting ten years ago, she'd thought of him little—so little, in fact, she wasn't sure she'd know his face anymore. With her luck, the person soon to answer her summons would be as nondescript and strange to her as this little house. Even so, she paced up to the door and, when she'd smoothed out her blouse and combed a lock of hair behind her ear, tapped the doorbell.

There came no immediate answer; she remained on the stoop, breath held, submerged in the suburban din of slow-going cars. The evergreen bush to her right twitched at the scurrying of a chipmunk. The curtains in the window shuddered then, too, as though someone had just chanced a peek around them.

She'd been considering a second press of the doorbell or a firm knock when a soft voice entered into hearing from the other side of the cherry-colored door. "*It's open.*"

This voice had been small—*very* small—and, it seemed to her, enfeebled. She stood there, frozen, wondering whether these two words had been an invitation—and, if so, to *whom*. It was possible that the occupant of this house was awaiting other company and so had left his door unlocked; what did not seem possible was that the homeowner could have expected Sadie Young, of all people, to arrive on his doorstep, seeking

to stir up the ghosts of the past. There was no telling whether the one inviting her in had been Halloran at all, in fact—her memories of the man were anything but firm, but unless the years had perfectly corrupted her recollections of him, she did not believe him to have ever spoken in such a tired little voice as this.

She didn't clarify, didn't announce herself or seek further permissions; casting off the awkwardness of the situation, she pushed open the door instead. Upon the squealing obedience of tired hinges and the rattling of the fussy knob, she passed through and found herself standing in a small living room, the pile of its carpet rather high and the air sour with stuffiness and old tobacco smoke. With great care so as not to make a commotion, she eased the red door shut and paused on the black entry mat.

Her own labored breathing in that cloistered air was all that could be heard. She stood now in a place only meagerly adorned. There was, in one corner, an elegant credenza into whose mahogany panels had been carved filigree patterns. Beyond this there appeared a loveseat whose depths teemed with what looked like a decade's worth of newspapers and a well-worn recliner with ruptured seams that revealed its yellowed stuffing. Between these was stationed a chipped wooden coffee table, and on the wall opposite the loveseat was a cheap reproduction of a dreary Grimshaw landscape, which hung crookedly. The dusty sill of the picture window was home to a number of glass baubles. At the room's easternmost wall there was nothing save a plain mantel, and below it a sooty hearth then host to some insubstantial twigs. Nothing else of note could be found in the room.

Two paths opened up before her; the first, straight ahead, seemed to lead to a kitchen whose state was not unlike that of the living room—dusty and lived in, but only tenuously. The other, requiring a turn to the left, would deliver one into a dark hallway along which there looked to be some four or five doors. Sadie paused at the border of this hall to count them; there were indeed five, and two of them were closed.

She stole a glance into the kitchen and spied no trace of the homeowner—no trace of the individual who'd invited her in—and she began to wonder if she had, in fact, heard any voice at all. She thought to speak, to announce herself, but the silence was at that moment too heavy a thing to unseat and, besides, her tongue felt cumbrous, incapable of pronouncing anything worthwhile.

Her attentions, then, were focused on this narrow hall. The floors on either side were littered with stacks of old books and still more newspapers. She took a slow step into the corridor, one hand pressed to the textured wall. Immediately, she drew her fingers away, however.

The walls were strangely marked—the deeper one went into the passage, the darker their color. The gradation of color from inch to inch had been so gradual, from a sooty black to a faint yellowing and everything in-between, that it had the look of some natural process long in the works. This discoloration, she quickly deduced, had been caused by years and years of constant smoke traveling down the length of the hall—and she knew it, because from one of the open doors further on a black, odorous smoke presently drifted down the passage to meet her. It had a rich tobacco smell, though the walls and carpet had been so saturated with the aroma that it proved almost cloying.

These tendrils of smoke acted as her guide as she wandered down the hallway and selected the open door from whence they came. Standing before it, she found herself at the threshold of a descending staircase—the entry to a cellar. Smoke hovered up from the dim depths of this space, clung to the stairs and the unfinished ceilings like a fog. There appeared no light in it, save for the sparse natural glow that issued from narrow, deep-set windows in the upper reaches of the walls and a vaguely orange light, as of a few candles or a weak desk lamp in some corner far-off from the stairs.

Sadie hesitated here, peered up and down the length of the hall, wondering whether the homeowner intended for her to climb down, or whether she should seek him out in one of the other rooms. Just then, that same voice called out to her once

again—and it came from down below, with a suddenness and depth that rattled her.

“I dreamt you would come,” said the man in the cellar. The utterance was gravelly and dry, as though the lips and throat of the speaker had fallen into disuse for the purposes of speech. He cleared his throat in apparent expectation.

She could think of no sensible reply to this and remained still in the hall, more than a little unnerved not only by the character of that voice, but for the content of its grating message. Sadie stood silently at attention between calf-high stacks of paperbacks and newsprint.

The speaker down below rattled on. Labored chuckles bookended the lulls in his speech and lent them something of the mocking, the accusatory. “Yes, you heard me right. I dreamt you would come. I’ve watched you walk down this street, wander down this dark little hall of mine a thousand times. You’ll poke your head in here soon enough—and you’ll double back, as if surprised. Then, you’ll ask me to tell you about your mother...”

Sadie shuddered, then fell headlong into his prediction by starting down the stairs on stilted legs. She arrived in the cobwebbed smoke-dense cellar, whose overabundance of shadow made its dimensions enigmatic and illusory. One had only to leave behind the final step to notice the heaps of books scattered across the cold concrete floors, their pages and covers blackened by the smoke and damp. At the cellar’s far-right corner, half-hidden behind a dented water heater, furnace unit and their effusions of pipes and dusty coils, was a cluttered desk, and in a high-back chair beyond it, basking in shadow, was the man who’d called her down.

At sighting his silhouette, she did indeed startle, though she tried with all her might not to. The handful of candles mounted to the bare wood of his desk stood a better chance of alighting the heaps of paper that burdened the surface than they did of revealing the whole of their owner’s shadow-hidden face. But despite the oppressive darkness, she could make out a few details—and he, too, with eyes evidently accustomed to gloom, studied her from behind thick-rimmed

glasses whose dense lenses occasionally threw off hints of candlelight.

The smoke issued from the end of a pipe held tightly in the man's teeth, and by the sheer amount of it in the air, the thing must have been ceaselessly lit. The bowl of the pipe glowed orange with his every slow breath, and his gaunt face, barely visible in those burning flashes, was dressed in grey stubble and partly obscured by greasy licks of silver hair. For clothing he wore a soot-stained dress shirt—but nothing else about him was clearly defined.

“Are you... Doctor Halloran?” she dared to ask, taking a step toward him. She nudged a pile of books as she advanced, and the whole degraded pillar swayed gelatinously. Beneath the film of grime on the uppermost volume she could make out a bit of the cover. This book—and likely all the others—appeared to be concerned with only one thing: The occult.

There was a slow, steady chuckle from the shadows, accompanied by the orange blinking of the pipe. “*Doctor?* No one's called me that in a long time. I retired that role ages ago, but it's always a thrill when someone out there recalls an old performance.”

“So, you weren't a doctor, then?” she challenged. “You weren't... a therapist? Just a fraud, were you?”

Halloran took a long drag. “I have been many things in my life, Ms. Young, but I have never been an out-and-out fraud.” His tone had taken on a harder edge. “When they brought you to me, the last thing you needed was a proper doctor. No, what you needed was someone with my skills, *my* knowledge. At least, that's what I used to think...”

Her eyes watered as the smoke wandered past. “Oh? What changed? What do you think now?”

She heard his teeth lock around the pipe in a fit of barely-contained animus. “I think you're a lost cause.”

A tremor rose out of her gut at these words and a scowl corrupted the lines of her fair mouth. “If you aren't a doctor, then who are you? What did you do to me? Why did my

grandparents bring me to you?” To this chain of questions, she finally added, “Why was your name in my father’s journal?”

He gave a caustic laugh. “Is that all you want to know?” He gave a faint shake of the head. “How can I make you understand the whole of it if you’re only concerned with your own chapter of the story?”

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean* that this whole thing is larger than you—than any one of us.” The smoldering tobacco burned brightly. “And it’s all coming to a head. We’re in the last pages now—nearing the epilogue, so to speak.”

“Enough,” she spat. Her anger had gotten the better of her and she stood at room’s center, fists balled. “What’s happening to me? I deserve to know. Tell me everything.”

“*Everything* I know?” mocked Halloran, throwing out a skeletal hand and waving at the hoard of mouldering books stacked all around him. “Why, *this* is everything I know! Get reading!” He chuckled darkly, leaning back in the squealing chair. “I take it you want the abridged version, don’t you?” He sniffed the hazy air and quieted as he went on, his tone adopting something of the dramatic. “Tell me, Sadie, do you believe in evil?”

She shuddered violently at being so familiarly addressed by this sinister character, and nodded.

“Yes, of course you do. You’ve been hounded by it for the better part of your life. But would you believe that there are people out there who don’t? They equate all misfortune, all wickedness, to chance—to the whims of an uncaring universe. And they persist in their unbelief despite no shortage of historical proofs. For example, I’m sure you’re acquainted with the various witch trials that have taken place in the past, all over the world? What do you think of those?”

Sadie worked over the question a moment, answering, “W-Well, those were mostly a sham, fueled by paranoia. Innocent people, mostly women, were put to death based on faulty testimony, or because of petty grudges—”

Halloran's reply was borne on a cloud of fresh smoke. "Mistakes *were* made in some cases, yes... but where did that paranoia come from? It comes from an innate understanding that such things *truly* exist on the periphery of normal human experience. Men first learned to fear the dark because of the things they knew to dwell in it—and I'm not referring solely to bears and wolves." He laughed wryly. "Or what about the Satanic Panic, hm? Have any opinions on that? Probably, like the rest of the world, you thought that was a fraud, too? A sensational moral panic?"

She went to nod, but jerked with terror as his bony fist struck the desk and caused the candles to gutter.

"It was no lie. If anything, the truth was *far* worse than what was reported. We're seeing bits and pieces of that come out now, in the news. The world as we know it is steered by a select handful with the most debauched tastes. But man will tell himself any lie to avoid pondering the dark side he knows all too well to exist! He will deny it until it comes for him, looks him in the face—and when it's gone, he has the nerve to try and convince himself it was mere delusion. Some of us, though... we haven't got the luxury of ignorance, have we?"

"And so, there began my interest in these things—in the occult. For years before you were even born I filled my head with the dark histories and works of long-dead philosophers, with the mutterings of debased sectarians and pariahs, all in pursuit of quenching my curiosity. It was for this reason that your father—an old college buddy of mine—brought me into the fold when he met that woman. He hoped that I would be able to help, that my impressive knowledge on the unspeakable and arcane could win the day—and there was a time that I was proud enough to share in his conceit.

"But dabble in darkness long enough and it colors you, Sadie. Those black eons in distant memory where witches practiced their primal diabolism? I have read of them—and *more* than read! I have dreamt their dark dreams, dreams written in the same black hand that scripted their blasphemous rites when the world was young. My mind became a receptacle for long-lost knowledge, for dissociated ideas all bound by the



same invisible thread; and that thread, I soon realized, dangled from the dark one's very own cloak.

“Wide is the gate. The more you acquaint yourself with the workings of evil, the nearer you are the threshold of menace. My researches, however well-intentioned at one time, have left only corruption in their wake. I wish I had never begun my work—and I hope never again to read another jot of forbidden things. I disavow every last word I have digested,” he muttered, waving at the mess of books. “But, once, we were young, your father and I... and we thought this process... this *decay* could be thwarted. Instead, my ceaseless pursuit of dark knowledge has only cursed me with an understanding of its inevitability—has granted me only a front-row seat to an apocalyptic spectacle I now realize I am powerless to prevent or even influence.”

“So, you were a friend of my father's?”

He nodded. “College roommates, old chums.” The pipe shifted from the left side of his mouth to the right. “I caught up with him awhile after we'd graduated. He told me he'd met a girl, was wild for her, but...”

She hung on his words so heavily that she nearly toppled over as he trailed off. “But what?”

“She acted a little strange,” continued Halloran. “He was beginning to get an inkling that she was mixed up in some kind of New Agey sort of thing, though she never spoke of it to him. That was how we got to talking about *her*—Sophia.”

Sophia had been her mother's name, though it was one she'd seldom uttered herself. Her upbringing had seen it spoken only very rarely, and always with a kind of apprehension that she'd found curious. Hearing it now on Halloran's lips, in this smoky setting, made her flesh crawl.

“I agreed to look into it. After all, I didn't want my old buddy dating a psycho, right? I didn't want him running around with some witchy girl trying to lay a hex on him, so he fed me information and I did what I do best—I researched it. And, you know, there was a strange thing about Sophia—she lacked a history. She wasn't like other college-aged girls; you

couldn't find her name in the phone book, couldn't find her in any university publication. Mind you, this was before the internet became widespread, but every source available at the time suggested she'd just popped into existence.

“She claimed to live in a dank old manor house on a very pretty hillside, in Tiffin, with her father. That was where Arnold, your dad, first met her. He'd been walking through the country, admiring the old house. It had looked abandoned, you see. But upon peering up into the windows he'd seen your mother's beautiful face and had called her down. The rest, as they say, is history.”

Whenever her father had been pressed to describe his first encounter with her mother, he'd never gone into quite so much detail as this; quite the opposite, he'd offered as little as possible, choosing to focus on her beauty, on their happiness. He had never mentioned a manor house—and, come to think of it, he'd never mentioned anything about her mother's father. Questions regarding her mother's parentage had always been met with a claim that they'd died before he'd had a chance to meet them.

“Your dad was real taken with this girl. And I don't blame him. She *was* beautiful.” Halloran paused here, seemed lost in reverie for a time. “But she was a weird one. Did strange things at night, was very secretive. Arnold kept on visiting her, drove out to that manor house every chance he got. And, wouldn't you know it...” He chuckled. “After a few of those visits, well, she ended up *with child*,” and he pointed a jagged finger at Sadie. “Your father was a good man, very traditional. He wanted to do things the right way—to marry her. But she wouldn't have it. She wasn't interested in that, and he suspected it had something to do with her faith, whatever it was. He tried and tried to get her to the altar, but he could barely drag her into town to the obstetrician's.

“She behaved even more strangely after she became pregnant with you. Sometimes, your dad would drive out to the house late in the evening, to surprise her, and she wouldn't be there; instead, she'd wander back into the house well after midnight, giving no clue as to where she'd gone. He tried to

get her to move into town with him, to start a proper life together, but she put him off. The house was too important for her, she claimed—she couldn't leave her father.

“You may be starting to understand that Sophia was no ordinary woman—that this strangeness was indicative of something sinister. Well, that's what I thought, too, the more I looked into the matter. For starters, that house of hers *was* abandoned. No property taxes had been paid on it for years, and by your father's own admission it had no power or running water. The last known person to have owned the house was an Italian, a fellow by the name of Alessio Sinistrari.”

This name resonated through her mind with notable weight. *Sinistrari... I think I've heard that name somewhere before.* At a loss as to where she'd heard it, Sadie banished it to the back of her mind and listened on.

“Now, this man, a scholar of great reputation... *he* was really something else. I got to thinking that Sophia was Sinistrari's daughter, but that didn't check out. See, Sinistrari was fairly old by the time he'd moved into the house in the late 20's. What's more, he'd been paralyzed, wheelchair-bound back in Italy. And when pressed, your mother never presented the surname Sinistrari. She called herself *Winslow*. Sophia Winslow. Before long, though, I realized that her tenancy in Sinistrari's old house was no coincidence.”

“All right,” she interrupted, “what happened after that? My mother became pregnant, but then what? I was told she'd died in childbirth, but...”

“But that was a lie, wasn't it?” replied Halloran with a knowing nod. “No, your mother did not die after delivery. Would that she had—that such a wicked thing *could* die as you or I! What really happened, when she'd been let out of the hospital, is that she insisted on taking you back to that old house. Your father threw a fit—and so did his folks. But she insisted. And not a day or two after being discharged, your mother disappeared with you.”

“She disappeared?” This stirred a recent memory, but at the moment she had trouble pinning it down.

“Yes, she did.”

Suddenly, she remembered why this story felt so familiar. “Wait a minute... My mother gave birth and then just up and disappeared with me? I’ve... I’ve heard this before. In my father’s journal, there were newspaper clippings, old stories about this happening all over the State—women vanishing with their babies. There were stories from way back—the 40’s, the 60’s, even up into the 80’s.”

Halloran wiggled his fingers in the air. “Whose hand do you think clipped those select items, my dear? I stumbled upon many troubling parallels to your mother’s case and that of those other women. I couldn’t ignore the similarities. The truth of the matter was that this wasn’t the first time your mother had vanished into thin air with an infant. The first time she’d done it, she’d gone by the name of Evelyn Renfield. The next time, she called herself Nora Tellier—then Stephanie Marsh some years after that. This time, she’d taken the name Sophia Winslow... but all these were merely pseudonyms—names used in place of that which has no home in human mouths.”

“I read those articles,” said Sadie, “but that’s impossible. My mother couldn’t have been responsible for all of those disappearances. Those women couldn’t have been *her*—the incidents all took place over decades.”

“If we were discussing a mere woman, I might be incredulous as well,” he replied.

Shaking, Sadie pressed him for more. “What happened after that? How did my father find me?”

“It all came down to the house she’d been staying in. I couldn’t get Sinistrari out of my head, and I knew he’d been involved in the situation that’d unfolded at Rainier Asylum in the late 1920’s. Surely you’re familiar with that mess?”

She nodded gravely.

“Your father and I took a gamble; we ventured to the asylum. And the things we saw there...” Halloran bit down on his pipe, and for the first time showed signs of true fear at discussing this horrific subject. The eyes behind the lenses

widened, picking up more of the candlelight, and his hoarse voice became hoarser, tremulous. “We found her in the sewers, below the basement level. We followed the sounds of your crying. There were others there—we were followed by some big thing on the upper levels, and further down your mother had assembled some friends. There was an altar in that room, and they seemed to be preparing for something... something that they’d done many times in that very spot... and it involved *you*.”

“T-They were... going to sacrifice me on the altar?” she asked, startled.

Surprisingly however, Halloran shook his head. “No.” He gulped very hard. “She... that is, your mother... was going to *eat you*.”

A long silence sprang up between them. Sadie wasn’t sure whether to retch or laugh at such a suggestion, but eventually settled on disgustedly uttering, “*What?*”

The man met her with a question of his own. “Where do you think the old fairy tale stories of witches eating little children come from, hm? I tell you, there’s always a kernel of truth in old myths and whispers. These things don’t cease to be true simply because decent people refuse to discuss them. You see, those fiends at the asylum dealt in the generation of pain—suffering. What greater suffering, what higher evil can you imagine than *this*? The warping of the mother-child relationship, which ought always to be pure and fueled by love, was the cult’s most potent rite—and its power is unimaginable. *You*, in fact, were intended to be the seventh, upon whose consumption the goals of the cabal would be realized.

“The Greeks, the Romans—they *loved* the idea of filial cannibalism. Why, we have only to look at stories of Saturn devouring his children for a mythological source deeply-ingrained in the classical psyche. And this dark, ancient faith stems from the same cursed tradition. A child nursed on the blood of the suffering and then given up as sacrifice—consumed by the demon-witch. The destruction of the maternal bond makes for a powerful ritual...”

She felt woozy, unable to retain her balance. Coughing through the smoke, she reached out to a pile of books and tried to steady herself. “That’s... that’s just insane. There’s no way that’s true.”

“But it is,” he said flatly. “Your father and I managed to break it all up. We scattered the worshippers—I dare admit we killed a few in the struggle—and I myself managed to pick you up and run you to safety. We confronted that vile witch and succeeded in binding her to that place, where she would be starved of the precious suffering she subsisted on and—we hoped—perish over the course of years. I escaped with you in tow, while your father secured her. There was a narrow pit in the floor before the altar, and she was dropped into it, bound with chains and critically injured. He then used various of the materials laying around to build a false wall further in, so that it would be difficult to stumble upon her cell.”

Without her having revealed to him the details of her own visit to the asylum, Halloran had touched upon numerous facts that had dovetailed perfectly with her own experiences—and the realization that he wasn’t lying made her stomach churn.

“We had hoped that she would die. She could not be killed in the normal sense—she isn’t human—but by cutting off the suffering of others that sustained her we felt reasonably sure that her strength would gradually deplete until she either perished or became so weak as to succumb to later assaults. We sealed her there, brought you out of that wretched place, and then he went to work on raising you. Our plan might have worked and your father might still be with us if not for what happened next.

“I mentioned other cultists, as well as that *thing* in the asylum. The horned beast couldn’t make its way down into the sewers for whatever reason, and so it couldn’t free her. At least, not directly. But there were others we had to worry about poking around the building. Some had managed to escape—and I dedicated myself to monitoring the place afterward.” He paused solemnly. “Thankfully, they never thought to look in the asylum. They looked for her elsewhere, probably assumed she’d gone into hiding. They had no inkling of where the

demon-witch was kept and there was, for a time, silence on every front. But then, as a teen, you got sick.

“This was something that your father and I hadn’t anticipated. You grew extremely ill, very nearly died—in fact, by the medical definition, you temporarily *did*. Your father was overjoyed when they brought you back, but if he could’ve seen you now, could have seen what was to come, I wonder if he wouldn’t have felt differently. You see, when you died, she took notice.

“That brief foray into death was all your mother needed. She sensed your presence as it moved from one sphere into the next—and when she saw that you were being drawn back into the world of the living, she expended almost all of her energy in reaching you. She marked you in her way, made it so that her followers could find you. Though she was incapacitated in the depths of the asylum, her deathless sleep was spent transmitting messages to you through dreams—and she was hopeful that one of the ghouls in her employ would eventually lead you back to her so that she might nourish herself as she’d intended to do all those years ago.

“Your father realized something had changed and reached out to me privately. I began to look into matters while he planned a return expedition to the asylum. He ultimately chose to go back alone, however, and there he encountered his end. He was savagely struck down by the horned thing that walks its halls. His body was left to fester on the grounds. When I didn’t hear from him for over a day, I went out there myself to look for him. I was the one who found his body and informed your grandparents.

“Shortly thereafter, your grandparents brought you to me—as per your father’s directions. I tried every trick in the book to make your mother lose your scent. You recall all the work we did—hypnotism, acupuncture, all sorts of superstitious methods. When you stopped seeing the dead, I thought you were cured—that we’d won! You left my care and set out on a promising life, and I felt sure that the fiend—having used so much of her energy in reaching out to you—was nothing but a husk. But I confess I was too scared to return to the asylum

and find out. I might have entered the building and sought her out, might have tried to destroy her weakened body. I can't say whether it would have worked. For all I know she's truly indestructible, even in a weakened, suspended state. But I lacked the courage.

"Years passed, and I thought I might find a way to get rid of her, but in all my reading I encountered only dead ends and darkness. I felt myself warped by my research; I became something of a hermit, digging deeper and deeper into my eldritch studies. Then, just recently, I saw something on the news—something that made me laugh and weep all at once, realizing that all my work, and your father's, had been for naught.

"A young farmhand had gone missing around the asylum. *Strange*, thought I. *What could have happened to the lad?* I shrugged it off until, that night, I had a very vivid dream. A dream of your mother. She appeared to me, and then I knew. I knew she'd been freed by the boy—that she walked the earth again. She was no longer a prisoner, but had escaped the cell to which she'd been confined since your birth. I was a coward not to finish the job while I had the chance, and now a young man has unwittingly doomed us all.

"You know, I heard on the news that the farmhand, this John Ford, recently turned up!" He chuckled darkly, though—unless her eyes were playing tricks on her—his stubbled cheeks were damp with tears. "There's no way he got out of there unscathed. No... that wasn't John Ford that checked in with the police... It's an imposter. It's *her*. This way, no one's thinking about the asylum anymore, about the dark history of that area. Just you watch—"Mr. John Ford" is about to go on a long trip overseas or otherwise shift suddenly into obscurity. It's all an act. But, I'm curious... what set you down this path again? I knew you'd come for answers one day, but how have you come to be wrapped up in this lately? Was it merely your mother's escape from the asylum? Or was there some change prior to that?"

She was too out of sorts to give a coherent reply to this, but attempted to explain her recent involvement in the matter



by describing her expeditions to Beacon Hill and Rainier Asylum. Halloran listened intently all the while, nodding much and taking active puffs from his pipe.

Having heard her piece, he put forth what seemed a very reasonable hypothesis. “There are other spirits in this world—spirits associated with the cult that serves your mother—and Mother Maggot had seized upon the girl who found her way into the house on Beacon Hill. It caused her immense suffering, which was fed psychically to your mother. Intruders into that house were rare—it was probably desperate to terrorize someone, to provide much-needed sustenance to the witch in the asylum.

“But when *you* became involved—when that spirit encountered *you* of all people—your mother took notice. This is how everything fell into place. Whatever success my paltry treatments had once had, their effect had run its course. Someone would have wandered into Beacon Hill and stirred things up eventually—it was unavoidable. But that they should come into contact with *you*? The deeper your involvement with that poor girl, the more energy your mother expended in influencing you. This is why you began to have the dreams again, why you started seeing the beckoning spirits once more.

“Your mother is free now, but by my reckoning she isn’t as strong as she once was. She’ll lurk in the shadows awhile, running through people like that farmhand, and your friend Ophelia. And when she’s slaked her thirst, she’ll emerge and pursue you herself. Then—when she’s done what she set out to do all those years ago, the work of the cult will have been realized and the world will be plunged into terror.

“There’s no telling where she’s gone in the interim, but if I were a betting man, I’d guess one of two places. She’s either lurking in the asylum, biding her time... or else she’s returned to that manor house. In either case, she plans to see things through. She will find you, and when she does, she will *consume* you. You won’t go down so smoothly as once, though,” he added with a laugh.

“What can I do?” she asked. “There must be *something* I can do to stop her, to prevent—”

“I can only recommend that you get your affairs in order, Sadie. There’s nothing to be done. If there had been, your father and I would have done it.” He winced a little, as if pained by something. “Whatever chance there was of striking her down when she was weak... I squandered it. The odds of such circumstances arising again are too slim to place any hope in. You could try to confront her, but then you may just give her precisely what she wants.”

Sadie wasn’t ready to surrender, to take no for an answer. Shuddering in the smoky darkness, she asked, “Well, what is she? Is she a demon? Some kind of evil spirit? Where did she come from? If I know what she is, maybe I can find a way to stop her—or, at least, restrain her.”

Halloran was about to reply when the silence was broached by the squeal of a door’s hinges in the level above. At hearing this, he settled into his chair and took a long drag from his pipe. “You know what she is? She’s *here*,” he said, his face disappearing completely behind a veil of smoke.

Soft steps began to play upon the floors of the living room, and were transmitted to the cellar in a fit of creaks. Sadie could easily visualize the path of the new guest—could picture the stride of those delicate feet as they passed over the carpet toward the dingy hallway. “It’s... it’s her?”

“Might be. Else it’s a *friend* of hers,” he replied. “Let’s just say I’m not expecting any other company.” Plucking the pipe from his mouth, he held it out, using it to point past the water heater at a spot across the room. “Move those boxes and books aside, quickly. There are stairs there—a walkout door. Hurry up.”

She hesitated, searching through the darkness for signs of this door. Overhead, slow steps began down the length of the hall. With a jackhammer for a heart, she pushed through the smoke, shadow and cobwebs for the opposite end of the room, and beyond a great pile of soiled hardbacks and boxes of damp newspaper, she found a handful of steps leading up to a windowless pair of metal doors. Sadie knocked the mess aside and rushed toward them just as the sound of a foot meeting the top basement stair was heard.

“Try and stay out of her reach. Don’t go back to the asylum, and stay away from Winslow Manor,” whispered Halloran as she darted up the steps and undid the rusty latch with a grunt. “I know you’ll want to poke around there, to see if Sinistrari left behind some clue, but the risk is too great—and delving into the darkness will blacken your soul like it did mine. You can’t fight fire with fire—can’t expunge evil with more evil. I should have known that from the start. I hope you can forgive me...” At once exhausted and dour, he trailed off.

She thrust open the doors. They opened outward, slamming noisily against the exterior, and she was deposited into the wet, overgrown lawn. She thought to call out to Halloran, to urge him to follow, but to her surprise the doors were quickly drawn back into place with a crash and the latch engaged. She heard his voice issue firmly from the other side. “*Go!*”

Sadie did as she was told. Still shaking, she ran across the lawn, rounded the corner and took flight.

““**W**hat made you change your mind?” he asked. Sadie studied the texture of the living room wall from the papasan, phone jammed up against her ear. “A ghost from the past,” was her enigmatic reply. “If you’re busy, it’s cool.”

“No,” continued August, “I’m free. I was just surprised to hear that you were ready to dive back into this thing. I mean, last time you—”

“I remember last time,” she interjected. “It’s different now. I’m not thrilled about it, but I just have to do something about this. Time isn’t on my side.”

“Did something *happen*?” Concern haunted his reply.

“I’ll fill you in once you get here,” she said. Her stomach groaned awfully, unimpressed by the spoonfuls of peanut butter she’d substituted for a proper dinner. “And, uh, bring food, will you?”

August clicked his tongue. “You’re a slave-driver, you know that?”

“I wouldn’t be mad if you brought drinks, too,” she added in a helpful tone.

“*Noted*. I’ll be over in, oh... two hours? They’ve got me closing solo tonight since *somebody* called off.”

Her cheeks reddened. “Yeah, well, look on the bright side: When this whole mess catches up to me and I wind up dead,

you'll have all the hours you can work!"

"*Oy vey...*" He was about to cut the line when she drew him back with another request.

"Sorry, but one more thing. Does the name *Sinistrari* ring any bells?"

"*Sinistrari?*" He licked his lips as though tasting the syllables.

"He was a scholar, I think. We read that name somewhere recently, didn't we?"

August snapped his fingers. "Yep. He was an Italian scholar—we read about him when we were looking into the asylum, remember? He'd written some books about classical mystery cults, right?"

"Can you do me another favor? Look into him. See if we have any of his books at the library, or any info on him in the database."

"Oh? He a person of interest?"

"I have a feeling he is."

"Gotcha. Well, things are slowing down. I'll see what I can pull up. *Ciao.*"

Sadie slumped in the chair, the legs of her pants damp up to the calves with dirty rainwater she'd kicked up in her hasty retreat from Halloran's place. Her shoes had been soaked through and her hair clung to her brow in sweaty tangles. She'd half-walked-half-jogged through scattered showers all the way back to her place—a trip of no few hours—and had burnt up the remainder of the day in doing so. Outside, the light was smalling.

She peeled off her damp footwear and put her hair up into a messy bun, starting up the TV and seeking out the local news. There were a few minutes till the forecast was set to air, and while the broadcast cut to a commercial break she set off to the bedroom in search of the cardboard box.

It was under her bed, where she'd left it—and though she knew it was simply her imagination, it somehow felt heavier

than before. She hauled it out to the living room and set it down on the side table beside her papasan, tossing the lid onto the floor and scooping out the contents with a sigh.

There was nothing left to do but to dive in.

To pretend that the stuff in this box was unimportant, that she could simply throw it out and resume a normal life, struck her as more exhausting a prospect than meeting the truth head-on, and so she spread out the materials and prepared to tear away the veil. Her meeting with Halloran had impressed upon her just how little time she had left remaining. *She'll come for me... there isn't much time left. I can either start reading, or I can just sit and wait for her to knock on my door...*

The news resumed, and a fresh-faced meteorologist in an ill-fitting suit began bantering with the anchors. "I've got good news for people who like bad news!" he announced. "Rain, rain and more rain this week! We may be looking at a record for this time of year—more on that in a bit."

"Great, just what we need. *More* rain," she muttered as she began shuffling through her father's journal. As if to drive home the weatherman's prediction, a distant burst of thunder rattled the skies.

First among the photos she'd left tucked inside the cover was one of a large house planted on a pleasant-looking hillside. When Halloran had earlier mentioned Winslow Manor, it had been just this sort of place that'd popped into her head. The reverse of the print bore no information; if this property had ever gone by that name, she'd have to corroborate it elsewhere. The subject of the picture, with its large entryway pillars and two boxy wings, carried nothing of the menacing. The print was in black and white and had been taken on a camera easily twice her age.

She recalled Halloran's warning to stay away from the old manor house. It was the closest thing to a lead she had in striking to the heart of these dark matters, and yet there was no telling what horrors she might encounter there. What's more, even if her mother wasn't then present at the house, Halloran had hinted at other dangers that might exist latently in certain

of the clues left behind by the occultist Sinistrari—namely, the possibility that she might become obsessed with the darkness herself. *Maybe I should just forget about the house. Halloran didn't think it a good idea for me to visit. But then...*

Curiosity got the better of her. She attempted to feed “*Winslow Manor*” into a search engine with other associated terms, but it spit out unrelated nonsense. Sadie turned her attention next to a satellite mapping website, through which she squared up an aerial view of mostly-rural Tiffin and began scrolling through it, inch by inch, acre by acre. This proved a time-consuming task—there was far too much ground to cover.

Sadie ditched her phone and chose to scrutinize the photo once more, eagerly seeking out minor details that might betray its location. There was frustratingly little to go by, however. Healthy trees were staggered about the rolling hills, but were not of remarkable size or species; the facade of the house itself, however well-photographed, boasted no house number or mailbox. The windows were all empty, and behind the structure there were only more hills and trees. For all she knew, this house was completely unrelated to her research—had been mixed in with the others accidentally.

The day's toil had left her fatigued, and the longer she stared at the house the more unfocused her gaze became. Her lids began to droop; sleep was coming for her.

Soon thereafter, Sadie drifted off where she sat, photo in hand.

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SHE WAS SUMMONED from her sleep by the rattling of the phone against her thigh. Sadie groaned, running a palm across her face. *How long have I been out?* Her mouth was dry, her neck stiff for the awkward napping posture she'd adopted. It took a few swipes to get the phone to stop dinging and shaking, and a few moments more for her to quit yawning and understand the meaning of the alert.

It was an email notification; she had a new message waiting in her inbox—a message from none other than August.

The subject line—*Re: Your Buddy Sinistrari*—caught her attention at once. She sat upright and opened it without delay.

*OK, I've done just a little digging on this Sinistrari fella, and I've gotta say I'm not a fan of where this is pointing, he'd written. Get a load of this! Who the heck is this dude???* What followed was a scanned attachment taken from a book in the library's collection. She tapped on the offered link and waited a few seconds for the PDF file to load—and when it did, her screen was filled with 2 pages of poorly-scanned text. She had to zoom in quite far to make sense of it.

The piece detailed the life of Alessio Sinistrari, a respected Italian scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose work had been centered largely on classical archaeology. His writings on the theory of hyperdiffusionism had been considered authoritative by the experts of his time, and in the early 1900's he'd also taken an interest in classical folklore and ancient religions, producing several celebrated volumes on both.

There wasn't anything remarkable about this at first glance; it wasn't until Sadie had read about the details of Sinistrari's personal life that she understood this man's significance to the whole puzzle—for he'd been named in relation to an infamous incident that'd taken place in Teramo, Italy, in the winter of 1925. This incident, ominously referred to in the Italian press as "*La caduta di Angle*" or "*The Fall of the Angel*"—was described in brief.

After years of success on the lecture circuit, Sinistrari invested his newfound fortunes in a small shoe factory in Teramo, Italy. It was there, in the two-story factory staffed largely by immigrants, that a mysterious fire occurred in January of 1925. The fire proved formidable; all seventy-six of the building's occupants perished, and by the time firefighters arrived at the remote scene, the building had collapsed.

Reports of the conflagration made mention of the smell—noticeable for several miles from the site—of burning flesh, and of the wailing of the building's doomed tenants. Adding to the infamy of the tragedy was the insistence of dozens of eyewitnesses that the fire had preceded an unheard-of event in



the skies. When the screams had ceased and the building had collapsed, filling the countryside with black smoke, witnesses reported seeing something—a figure, was the consensus—descending from the clouds. However impossible such a thing may have been, those who'd seen it firsthand clung firmly to their claims and began referring to it as a “fallen angel”. The identity of this alleged figure was unknown, and several pundits dismissed it as a mass hallucination of some kind.

Many of these same witnesses—by some counts more than half—died within days of the tragedy, and from strange and unexpected causes. Cerebral hemorrhages visited Teramo like a plague, killing more than twenty. Others, after day-long panic attacks, died in their sleep. A handful of suicides were recorded in the proceeding days, as were at least three miscarriages, and a Teramo police officer was found dead the morning after the blaze with ruptured lungs—despite no other signs of injury.

Teramo's troubles only deepened, for in the hours and days that followed the fire, hitherto bountiful crops within several miles were found to have failed, and livestock animals dropped dead en masse. These terrible and widespread incidents which all appeared to stem from the factory fire and the sky-borne hallucination, cemented it in the public consciousness as “The Fall of the Angel”, and when suggestions of a supernatural or occult element spread, there was outcry in the whole of Italy.

Naturally, Sinistrari was summoned by the authorities for questioning. He was found in his home, and had evidently suffered a serious nervous attack of some kind which had rendered him wheelchair-bound, blind and deaf—and this having occurred almost simultaneously with the fire that had destroyed his business. Ultimately, Sinistrari was not charged.

The cause of the blaze was never determined—investigators suspected arson, but lacked the evidence to support their suspicion in court—and as the months wore on, certain conspiratorial theories regarding *The Fall of the Angel* event gained some traction in the press. Some proposed that the fire—and its subsequently monstrous effects—had been

intended as some sort of occult ritual, a mass sacrifice. Sinistrari's then-recent forays into folklore and ancient religions, coupled with his ownership of the business, brought him considerable suspicion. By spring of 1925, mere months after the tragedy, Sinistrari had left Europe altogether and settled in the United States. His whereabouts after settling in Tiffin, Indiana that spring are not recorded. He was assumed to have died in the years since his move, though the scanned piece stated no obituary had ever appeared.

This struck Sadie as an enormous find—and what's more, she found throughout the account details of especial significance. Chief among these had been the passage detailing the powerful smell of burning flesh that had filled the Italian countryside, and of the victims' cries and wails. Very recently indeed she had encountered these very smells and sounds. They had issued from the tortured body of Watchful Tom...

“*Aiuto!*” That had been the repeated refrain of one of the disembodied voices clinging to that horned titan in the asylum, and it had struck her then as a foreign word. Though she struggled to spell it, the cycling of a few vowels in a search engine translator eventually yielded what Sadie had begun to suspect.

The phantom cries of “*Aiuto!*” had indeed been a foreign tongue—*Italian*. What's more, that word, which she'd heard pleaded over and over again, could be translated very simply as “*Help!*”

She and August had heard tell of the horned tenant of Rainier Asylum—the demonic Watchful Tom that reeked of burning flesh, and who seemed to gibber from a hundred unseen mouths. Those who'd seen the thing stalking the surrounding fields thought it a lingering stain from the days of the Rainier cult—a demon called up from the depths and doomed to wander.

Perhaps, though, this dark spirit hadn't been called *up* from anywhere, but rather drawn *down* from the smoke and destruction at Teramo.

Had the Teramo Incident really been an occult ritual, a mass sacrifice of some kind, meant to summon or placate a dark presence—the very presence that had been housed in Tom’s twisted body? The more she weighed these new facts against her own experiences, the likelier it seemed. Sinistrari’s tangential association with the tragedy in Europe, followed by the surfacing of similar terrors in Tiffin after his unexpected move across the Atlantic, could not be a coincidence.

She had known from her dealings with Halloran that Sinistrari’s residence, Winslow Manor, was located on the hilly borders of rural Tiffin. That pastoral town was rather large, however; one could drive its country roads for miles and find little of substance in its sprawling fields and forested stretches. If Sinistrari’s connections with the asylum were as plain as they seemed however, it stood to reason that his residence had not been far from Rainier—and so she figured, if it still stood at all, one might find it within a distance of five or ten miles from the asylum.

Tired of squinting at her phone screen, Sadie upgraded to her laptop. With it, she accessed a satellite mapping service, and when she’d squared Rainier Asylum’s familiar shape in her sights, she began a survey of the surrounding countryside, fanning out a half-mile here, a half-mile there, with every careful scroll. She saw the woody expanse surrounding the abandoned institution; she caught sight of the piggery, and of the winding road that hugged its northern side.

She scrolled south for a time, and found herself looking at a series of hillocks home to close-grown pines. At first glance there seemed nothing of note here, and she took it for unincorporated land, or perhaps a protected nature area, but where proper roads proved elusive, her study yielded evidence of old paths leading away from the main street and into the labyrinth of conifers.

Winding through the rolling hills, a slightly darker color than the surrounding green and marked out more insistently by the felling of trees many years previous, appeared a footpath—and this, she discovered with much curiosity, led well into the hills, to what the satellite service seemed to render as a lone

abode. Only a grayish roof was visible through the tops of the towering trees—and this, just barely—but the longer she stared at it, the more certain she was that it was a lonesome house, and very possibly the one she was searching for.

There could be no comparing it to the photo of the manor house she'd found in her father's things; though she zoomed and scrolled, the detail of the satellite image was too grainy to make a thorough comparison. Nonetheless, it fell just within the five-mile radius she'd earlier proposed, and existed on a swath of hilly land, just as Halloran had said. Wishing to be quite sure, Sadie made note of the house's location and then continued her search through the Tiffin countryside for another site which might match the description of Winslow Manor.

There was none. Thirty minutes of zooming in and out, of inching through satellite images acre-by-acre, brought only eye strain and certainty that this mysterious house buried within the wooded hills was, in fact, her mark.

Outside, a flurry of raindrops struck the window and the heavens began to quake with cacophonous thunder. She rose, daring a peek beyond the blinds just in time to catch a white bolt of lightning streaking across the horizon. The trees between her building and the next one in the complex were given to a terrible trembling as the rain and wind picked up, and she watched as a figure—shopping bags clutched in hand—dashed across the green from the parking lot.

She scanned the damp, stormy world outside her window listlessly; opened it just a few inches so as to let some fresh air into her stuffy apartment, and as she stood there, watching the weather turn sour, she noticed something about the building across the way. Like hers, it was a mere two stories and was sectioned off into some ten or twelve apartments. The windows of many of these units glowed as their tenants set about their evenings, but it was an unlit window—a second-story window roughly aligned with that of her own room, that drew her attention most of all.

Someone was standing in that window—which was darkened, save for the dim light of the outside fixtures and the occasional bursts of lightning—much as she was, looking out

into the courtyard. The distance, rainfall and low lighting served to muddle the whole scene, but the figure stationed before the window across the way appeared to be that of a wan woman—noticeably pale even from Sadie’s vantage point, and raven-haired.

Rivulets of warm rain tumbled down the length of the screen as Sadie peered out into the evening, and as she did so she couldn’t help feeling that she was being watched by that woman in the apartment opposite. The figure didn’t move, but remained close to the glass and almost seemed to slump languidly against the right side of the sill, like a life-sized doll left to keep vigil.

Lightning tore across the sky, rendering the courtyard day-bright for an instant. No sooner had the light faded did the shape of the woman disappear completely from the window. The figure had passed out of sight as though it had never been there at all—like a decal ripped suddenly from the pane. No matter the late-summer mugginess, Sadie felt a chill steal through the room as she dwelt before the open window, face splashed by errant raindrops.

She shut the window and drew the blinds, no longer interested in what lay outside her four walls. A look at the time told her August was only just locking up at the library; he wouldn’t be by for another hour, at least. With time to kill, Sadie plopped down into her papasan and was preparing to leaf through her father’s journal when the muttering of the television poached her attention.

She’d left the local news channel on, and the recognizable jingle for a breaking story sounded. A solemn-faced anchor filled the screen soon thereafter, and when he’d apologized for interrupting the scheduled programming, he started into his report. “Breaking news tonight as local firefighters struggle to contain a *massive* residential fire here in Montpelier.”

The broadcast cut to footage of a burning house halved by a pillar of flame. Its roof was being gnawed away by the fire, its walls floundered, and the entire structure heaved out immense clouds of black smoke. A pair of firetrucks flanked the site and a dozen firefighters scrambled all around it,

blasting the column of flame with water to little effect. Even the storm failed to weaken it—if anything, the gales of wind whipped the blaze to even greater heights.

The anchor continued in voiceover. “I’m being told that this home on Laurel Street caught fire a few hours ago. No word yet on any victims. Firefighters have been unable to enter the building due to the fearsome heat, and so far the blaze has only grown. Neighboring homes are being threatened and their occupants evacuated. Authorities have not determined the cause of the fire, but expressed surprise at its intensity. We’ll have more details for you as they become available.”

Sadie leaned toward the screen and mouthed the anchor’s words incredulously. *A home on Laurel Street?*

The burning house on-screen was Halloran’s.

A few hours earlier, Sadie had paid Halloran a visit—the tail end of which had been interrupted by rather unwelcome company. In her flight, she'd never thought to look back, concerned solely with her own survival. Now, as she watched the column of flame grow higher, the quaint one-story reduced to cinders, she was struck by profound guilt. The night sky was further blackened by the imposing blaze, and the firefighters on site could find no angle of attack by which to lessen it. The house belched out smoke like a laughing mouth.

Had Halloran made it out of the house all right? For that matter, who had paid him a visit? *Was it her... or was it someone else?* At their farewell, Halloran had been certain of only one thing—that the intruder meant harm. He'd seen to it that she escaped the property, but whether he'd enjoyed the same luxury remained to be seen—and gazing widely at the catastrophe on TV, she couldn't help but doubt it.

The ferocity of the fire and the overabundance of smoke stirred a recent memory in her; that of the altar carving she'd seen in the secret chamber at Rainier Asylum. That hellish scene in stone—featuring the immolation of so many innocents and the great horned thing to which their anguish was being fed—would never leave her. This incident called to mind, too, the case in Teramo she'd only just read about—wherein Sinistrari's factory had caught fire and its occupants had perished horribly in the blaze, in what some thought had been a diabolical offering.

Sickened, she looked away from the screen and stepped into the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of water and downing it to keep the nausea at bay. The drink failed to soothe her nerves, however—the cold water sloshed around within her and made her guts churn that much harder. A startling crack of thunder rang out, and before she could set it on the counter, the glass slipped out of hand, splintering across the floor. She stepped back, careful not to bury her sole in the pile of glass, and knelt down to pick up the most jagged pieces, only to spy the handprint on her arm in the process. In her current state, the sight left her woozy and she fell back on her haunches, shuddering.

*Halloran spent most of his life reading about these things and trying to help your dad put an end to this, but he couldn't stop her. Today, she came for him. It's only a matter of time before she...*

She gasped as if to suck the unspoken words back down and crawled, rather than walked, to her papasan, leaving the pile of glass on the linoleum. Once situated in the chair, she tucked a blanket around herself and stared with watery eyes at the bulb in the nearby lamp, which dimmed slightly for the lightning that brightened her window. The wind spoke in a curious low tone—a tone, it seemed to her shaken ears—not unlike a deep hum. It made the building tremble so that she could feel it through the floors. It half-reminded her of Halloran's laugh.

*She will find you... and when she does, she will consume you,* he'd warned her with the chuckle of a man who'd exhausted every lead and had subsequently made peace with the inevitable. Her thoughts flitted once again to the vile thing that wore her mother's skin and engorged itself on suffering, and her heart felt as though it would mutiny. Quite absentmindedly, she clawed up her father's old journal and cracked the cover, flipping through the first few pages as if expecting to find a remedy to her woes printed in his hand.

Several pages had been torn away throughout the thing, and many others, like the one bearing Halloran's name and number, boasted only cryptic snippets. Toward the middle of



the volume, though, she struck upon what appeared to be a series of journal entries. Entire sections had been excised, and those that remained had in many cases been truncated by the lifting of pages. None were dated, and the first in the sequence, a mere half page of content, struck her as utterly banal.

*What a game! Cleaned up rather nicely tonight after the Tigers shut down the Reds 4-1. Leave it to Marcus to bet the farm on Cincinnati! He got stuck paying for drinks, and I made sure to have a couple extra. Poor guy's been unlucky on a few fronts—he struck out with the waitress at last call, too.*

Terrified though she'd been, Sadie couldn't help but frown at this brief entry. She'd read it in her father's voice and couldn't imagine him writing such a juvenile thing. Though kind and warm toward her, he'd always been something of a stoic. This journal entry read like something written by a teenaged girl, however. It was strange to think that her father had ever written such things or led a "normal" life. *Dad was just a young guy, betting on sports with his friends, once. But then everything changed...*

She flipped to the next entry, separated by the remnants of a few nicked pages, and found it already in progress. This one captured her attention from the very first:

*I've never met anyone like her. She keeps to herself a lot, isn't talkative, but she's got the most adorable smile. Her name's Sophia. I've never known a 'Sophia' before—it has a good ring to it.*

Her breath hitched as she realized what she was reading. *He's... he's writing about mom in here...*

Turning the page, she read on eagerly, the rain coming down in sheets.

**A** fragment from the journal of Arnold Young:

*I'VE NEVER MET anyone like her. She keeps to herself a lot, isn't talkative, but she's got the most adorable smile. Her name's Sophia. I've never known a 'Sophia' before—it has a good ring to it.*

*The other day I went out for a walk and decided to head into the country. It's real pretty out there this time of year, if you get past the farms. Lots of little wooded areas and hills on unincorporated land that you can explore. When you find one and there are no signs that others have been there, you get to feeling like it belongs to you. That was the mood I was in: I wanted to find something for myself, something to call my own.*

*I was some miles into it, getting a little sweaty and thinking about turning back, when I happened upon this big ol' cluster of hills and just knew I had to climb them. It took me awhile, but I finally got to the top. And what did I find? A house. A shabby old manor house sitting between the hills, surrounded by pines. At first, I didn't even realize there was a house there, as the trees were so dense thereabouts, but the smoke coming from its chimney gave it away. It was pretty warm out, so the thought of someone sitting in front of a fire weirded me out a little—and made me more curious. So, I came down off that hill and got a little closer to the place, just intending to have a look around.*

*When I drew up to it, I caught sight of this beautiful face staring down at me from one of the upper story windows. She was resting against the sill like a cat, this mischievous smile on her lips. Well, when someone smiles at you like that, what choice have you got but to introduce yourself? I stood beneath her window and we had a chat.*

*Her voice is the prettiest I've ever heard, like music. And her hair—she's got the longest, silkiest black hair I've ever seen. Big, dark eyes, too. She's easy to talk to—the kind of pretty girl who knows she's pretty but doesn't let it go to her head.*

*She told me she lived there with her dad, but didn't talk about herself a whole lot besides. I spent about half an hour there, even came inside for a bit, but didn't see or hear anyone else. There was a wheelchair in one of the rooms, though—it could be that he's sick or something. That might explain the condition of the house. To be honest, it's in awful shape—hardly fit to live in. It didn't bother me all that much, though—not with Sophia to talk to.*

*I'm going back to see her again soon.*

THE NEXT PAGE WAS MISSING, and she started into an entry already in progress:

*... MIND YOU, he didn't come around to say hello. I heard his wheelchair rolling around upstairs. Sophie didn't want to disturb him, so we sat outside, in the grass, talking.*

*We talked till it was almost dark, and she asked me about all sorts of things. We talked about my family, where I grew up. As always, though, she's tight-lipped about where she came from. She hardly mentions her dad, no talk whatsoever of her mother or any siblings. I don't even know what she does for fun, except for walking around in the woods.*

*The manor house sits smack dab in the middle of some hills, and there are enough trees around it to keep it pretty well hid. But if you keep walking past the house, deeper into the*

*hills, you find yourself in a sea of green needles that goes on and on. The pines grow so thick behind that house that it's hard to know where you're going. Seriously, we went for a little stroll into the pine wood and the sunlight was reduced to a few yellow pinholes on the ground. It was disorienting.*

*I've been up there three times now. I asked her if she'd come out with me to a movie, maybe dinner. She seemed a little hesitant at first, but not for the reasons I'd initially feared. The thing is, she seemed nervous about leaving the property. I imagine it's because she doesn't want to leave her father alone for too long. She hasn't told me much about him, but as his sole caretaker in such a remote place, it stands to reason she wouldn't want to be away from him.*

*She agreed to a lunch date, though. I'm picking her up at noon.*

THE NEXT ENTRY remained in its entirety:

*ENJOYED a picnic at the park today. A very good time with Sophie. We sat near a pond, which was full of ducks, and the wind kept wreaking havoc on our spread. It was a great few hours, and I hung out with her awhile longer after driving her back.*

*Something strange happened at the start, though, and I'm only just now remembering it as I write all this down. I probably shouldn't think anything of it, and at the time I just wrote it off, but recalling it now—I can't say why, particularly—it leaves me feeling uneasy.*

*Earlier, when I went to pick her up, I drove deep into the field on the dirt road and parked at the base of one of the hills. From there, I walked up the hill and back down again, to the house, as usual. In my approach, I just so happened to pass by one of the lower story windows, and I looked inside.*

*What I saw confused me—and gives me a weird feeling in my stomach as I reflect on it.*

*I had an unobstructed view of the den area, and I caught a glimpse of Sophie. She was sitting on a chair, but in a most peculiar way, with her arms limp at her sides and her neck bent over the back of the chair. Her eyes were wide, and she was just staring at the wall behind her. It wasn't a brief thing, either—it's not like I caught her in the middle of an awkward stretching routine. For ten, maybe fifteen seconds, she stayed put that way, nearly wrapped backwards around the chair, staring. I half-thought something was wrong and I hurried to the door, knocked.*

*A few moments later she opened up with a warm smile. Nothing was amiss with her, and as we set out for an afternoon of fun I admit I forgot about it. In retrospect it was strange, though. How long had she been sitting that way, and why? How long had she stared like that, and at what? People tend to do weird things when they're by themselves, and I'm no exception. I talk to myself from time to time... But this little peek through the window left me uneasy.*

~

THERE WAS a firm knock at the door, and Sadie startled so terribly the journal tumbled from her hands and fell shut. She'd been so absorbed in her reading that the noise of the storm had fully receded from conscious thought; now, it surged back to the fore, and she cast a nervous glance at the window, expecting it at any moment to shatter under the force of the rain.

Slowly clawing her way out of the chair, she stepped softly across the room and approached the door. "W-Who's there?" she asked, looking through the peephole.

She gasped, fell a few paces back.

The other end of the peephole had been filled by a wide, staring eye.

**A**nd that eye was August's.  
"It's just me," he announced, oblivious to the fact that he'd just given her a heart attack. "Sorry it took me so long. The weather's pretty awful."

Sadie shook her head and threw open the door, meeting him with a frown. "I wish you'd called. I didn't know when you'd be coming and you scared me half to death."

His soggy form shuffled into the apartment, immediately shedding the dripping jacket and waterlogged shoes. "*I* scared you?" he countered. "What's got you so worked up? You been reading ghost stories or something?" He grinned, then undid the floral print bowtie he'd been wearing. "I was going to pick up food, but the roads are swamped. Part of Secor is flooded—Rathbun, too."

"Don't worry about it." She locked the door and crept back to her chair, dropping down and bringing her knees to her chest.

"So..." He settled onto the sofa and tented his hands. "What've *you* been up to today?"

Without a word, she reached for the TV remote and went flipping through the local news channels till she found one covering the house fire on Laurel Street. Lips pursed, she jabbed the remote at the TV as a pointer.

"Oof," said August, watching the fiery footage. "That's terrible. You'd think with all the rain the fire would go out a

little easier. It just keeps burning and burning, huh? Maybe it's a chemical fire. Homeowner might've been making drugs or something in the basement, you know? I wonder whose house it was."

"It was my old shrink's," she spat.

He cocked his head to the side and met her with an incredulous gaze. "*Huh?*"

"I went out there today, to that very house. It belongs... *belonged* to Marcus Halloran, the man my grandparents took me to, the one who treated me as a teen when I first began seeing the beckoning dead. But it turns out Halloran wasn't a doctor or therapist at all—he was a friend of my dad's, who'd gotten too deep into his occult studies." She ran through her entire visit with Halloran in brief, shuddering as she divided her gaze between August and the blaze on TV. "I don't know if he made it out," she concluded.

August chewed on his thumbnail, legs crossed. "The fact that he hoarded books made a fire like this a question of *when*, rather than *if*. It's a miracle a chainsmoker like him didn't set it himself sooner. Are you sure someone actually started this—that it wasn't just an accident?"

She shot him daggers. "Yeah, I'm sure. We heard someone enter the house while we were talking in the basement. He wasn't expecting any other company, and yet someone waltzed right in and he seemed to know it was my mother, or else someone associated with her. He urged me to leave through the walkout door and then he locked it behind me. He wouldn't have done that unless he'd been certain of a threat, don't you think?"

"Sure, sure," he said, hands up, "I just don't want to jump to conclusions, that's all. Arson's a pretty big deal."

"Not to someone who eats their own children," was her rejoinder—and the reality of such a thing struck her as so insane that she laughed in spite of herself. "Everything he told me was crazy. I couldn't believe it—I refused to. And yet..." She shrugged defeatedly. "It makes sense."

“So,” began August, holding up his fingers as he strolled through a number of key points, “This guy in Italy, Sinistrari, kills a bunch of people working in his shoe factory as some sort of occult ritual. He then ends up wheelchair-bound, buys a house in Tiffin, of all places, and—*it just so happens*—things at Rainier Asylum start going south immediately after he arrives. The asylum is haunted by some disfigured thing that reeks of burning flesh and sounds like dozens of trapped Italians, and your mother is some kind of baby-eating demon-witch that Sinistrari and his cult worshipped. Is that about right?”

She nodded gravely.

His nostrils flared as he reviewed the whole of it once more in his head. “That is... yeah, that is definitely the most insane thing I’ve ever heard. Bar none.”

She held up the journal. “I’ve been reading this. Some pages are missing, but there are journal entries written by my dad in here, detailing his relationship with my mother. He first met her in that house—Winslow Manor—and Halloran thought she might still be there now. Since she was freed from the asylum, it’s possible she’s hiding out there. Years of imprisonment have made her weak, but it’s only a matter of time until...”

“And what did he have to say about John, the farmhand? That he was some kind of imposter—your mother in disguise?”

“That was what he thought, yes. And... I think I agree with him. The asylum messed with my head, there’s no doubt about that... but I know what I saw down there. I saw his corpse with my own two eyes. And, come to think of it, while I was out earlier today, I thought I saw him on the street. It was only for a brief moment, but he seemed to be staring at me, and the radio made this noise like...” She trailed off; the incident at the bar felt so distant to her now and she felt at a loss for words. “I think he’s right, though. I don’t think *John Ford* is really *John Ford* anymore.”



“You found John’s phone number, right?” asked August, pulling out his cell. “Let’s call it, then. See who picks up.”

She reared back, clutching at her blanket. “I thought about doing it earlier, but I... I can’t. What if *she* picks up? I wouldn’t know what to say.”

At this, he chuckled. “Picture it: You’re a child-devouring hellspawn who’s been locked up since ‘94. When you’re finally freed, you nick a young guy’s phone and carry it around so that you can pretend to be him and possibly topple his high score in Candy Crush. It’s gotta be one heck of a culture shock, coming back into the world after a quarter of a century trapped in a sub-cellar. Like, she was last free when Hootie and the Blowfish were topping the charts!”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t see the humor in it,” she shot back. Sadie pulled up John’s number on her phone and dialed it before she could lose her nerve. She then shoved it into August’s hand, and he promptly put it on speakerphone.

The line didn’t ring, though. A tinny, familiar voiceover began. *We’re sorry. That number is not in service...*

He clenched his jaw, trying the number once more. The result was the same. “Now that’s a little weird. If I’d been missing for a few days, had the whole town worried about and searching for me, I can tell you that *shopping around for a new cell phone* or changing my number would be, uh, *pretty* low on my list of priorities.”

“That phone,” she interjected, “was probably ground to dust in the asylum—else it’s still with his corpse, in that hole...”

“Yeah, and I’d imagine the coverage down there is pretty spotty.” When his further attempts at levity fell flat, he cleared his throat. “OK, so suppose everything this Halloran guy said was on-point. Now what?”

“If I take him at his word, then there’s nothing to be done. It’s a waiting game. She’ll come for me eventually—probably when I least expect it—and she’ll have her way. I can run, and I may have some luck at it for awhile, but she won’t stop

pursuing me. The roots of this thing run so deep that she must have eyes searching for me all over the country—all over the world, for all I know. The beckoning dead will keep reaching out to me, and it's only a matter of time until..."

"Now, what if Halloran was wrong?" asked August, leaning forward. His brow was furrowed and he took on an uncharacteristic solemnity that she couldn't help but find endearing on his rosy, youthful features. "He did a lot of reading—and as a librarian, I applaud him. But that doesn't mean that he knew everything there was to know about this. Right? He said himself that he might've had a chance, when she'd been isolated all those years, to strike her down. She's still out there now—weaker than she was when your father imprisoned her. We could lock her up again, or else try and find a way to kill her. Nothing on this Earth is immortal. She must have some kind of weakness. If someone brought her into this world, she can be sent back, too."

She shook her head. "It's too difficult. Halloran and my father did it once, but speaking to him today he didn't think it possible to trap her again. There's too much to lose—"

"I'll say there is," he replied, pointing at her. "If we *don't* try, we may as well hand-deliver you to her! I've come along with you this far and I don't plan to just throw in the towel because things get tricky. Now's the time to strike, to be audacious. Your mother won't expect that. She's still recovering from her years in bondage—the time is ripe for a sneak attack, a sucker punch. We'll take this to her doorstep, figure out what her weaknesses are, and get rid of her one way or another. A stake through the heart, a silver bullet—we'll do what needs done. Halloran suggested that Sinistrari might've left some stuff behind, right? Let's do it, then. Let's go."

She was moved almost to agreement by his vehemence, but stopped short of his "*storm the beach*" attitude. More than anything, she was baffled at his dedication to her cause. "Why do you keep helping me with this? Wouldn't it be easier for you to, I dunno... stop answering my calls? Work opposite shifts?" Sadie offered a sheepish smile. "I really appreciate all you've done, but I don't understand why you're so gung-ho

about this. You'd be safer if you just left all of this behind you, pretended not to know me."

August firmed up at this, his eyes narrowing. "That didn't work out so well for Halloran, did it?" He sighed, kneaded one of his earlobes between his fingers. "Look, at first, I got involved in this mess because it was something to do. It was interesting, and you were a friend, so I figured '*oh, why not?*' But as the days pass and we fall deeper into this rabbit hole, the scarier it gets. You know what really keeps me up at night, though?"

She shook her head.

"Trying to shrug this off like Halloran did. For years he knew all about what was happening, could have tried to put an end to it even after your father died. But he was a coward. You know, you're a good friend, Sadie, but you're not the only victim in all of this. You're just the first domino in a set that's going to knock over the entire world, by the sounds of it. *But...* if we can keep you from falling, we can stave off the apocalypse, yeah? I don't know about you, but that's incentive enough for me to keep on with this thing. And another thing—it's *interesting*. The more we learn, the more we discover of the underlying web, the greater my compulsion to get to the heart of it. I love a good mystery, and even though I'm spooked by everything that's happened, I can't help but continue. I'm addicted to the thrill of exploring abandoned places, cheating death. I don't do a whole lot in my free time. This is just about the most excitement I've ever had."

"Gotcha. Well, I appreciate it." Her smile faded a little as she recalled her meeting with Halloran, however. "You know... when I was speaking to him, Halloran did warn me. He warned me that getting too involved in this stuff—in the dark, the occult—can warp you, leave you changed. He didn't elaborate, but..." Images of the unkempt man, of his smoke-stained hermitage, flashed through her mind. "Interesting though it is, we should try and keep a healthy distance. I don't think it's wise for us to go to the house. He specifically told me not to."

“No worries,” said he, standing up. “I’m not looking to page through the Necronomicon or anything. My interest is merely intellectual. And, sure—the guy doesn’t want you getting hurt. But that old house is just about the best lead we have. It was Sinistrari’s place—ground zero. There’s no telling what we might find if we explore it.” He frowned. “Did he happen to tell you where the manor house is, though?” He pulled the photo from the pile of black and white pictures and squinted at it. “I assume this is the place, but... we don’t have an address, do we?”

Sadie rose and sought out her laptop. Placing it on the kitchen counter, she fired up the mapping website and showed him the satellite image she’d earlier discovered. “Now,” she began, “I’m not saying this is the right place, but there *does* appear to be a house here, surrounded by hills and trees, which would be hidden from the surrounding roads. It jibes with my father’s description in the journal, though we won’t know if we’ve got the right place till we see it up-close.”

He compared the slant of the roof in the black and white print against the grainy satellite image. “It *could* be the same place. There are some slight differences in the shape of the roof, but that could simply be due to weathering and breakage over the years.” He nodded. “I say we go for it.”

“Are you sure?” On the one hand, she wanted to go along with his plan—but on the other, Halloran’s warning still rang in her ears. “Furthering our involvement—digging deeper into this evil stuff... it may not be safe. It could change us, August—it changed Halloran.”

He rolled his eyes. “It sounds like Halloran was a New-Agey kook before you were even born, to be honest. His fascination with this stuff was unhealthy from the beginning. I’m not interested in learning any more than necessary. If Sinistrari’s materials are still in that house, we may be able to learn more about your mother and her vulnerabilities. And even if we don’t find anything like that, we may find *her*. She’s not in fighting shape, right? Well, there’s two of us and only one of her. I like those odds.”

*“As far as we know there’s no one else in that house,”* she added. “Who knows what else might be lurking in there.” She palmed at her brow. “When would we go? My sick day opened up my schedule... but what about you?”

“My schedule is flexible,” he replied. “Debra’s been looking for extra shifts lately and has been bugging me non-stop. I guess she and her husband are saving up for a houseboat or something. I’ll see what shifts she’s interested in and I may be able to clear out the remainder of the week if she’s extra desperate. In theory, we could head out there tomorrow.”

She shuddered at the suggestion, but was thankful to have August on her side—and more so that he seemed to have everything under control.

He paced about the living room, picking up the rest of the black and white photos. Studying them in turn, he then motioned to the manilla folder that had been contained in the box. “Have you looked at that yet?”

“No,” she replied. “I haven’t had the chance. I was reading the journal.”

August traded the photos for the folder, and returned to the sofa with it. He cracked the cover and began following the grainy print on the page as he read under his breath. She joined him, reading over his shoulder.

They were looking at a medical record—and the chunky lettering and unaesthetic layout told her it was anything but recent before she even glanced at the date on the header of the first page. It was a thing of middling thickness; either incomplete or indicative of a brief hospitalization, and the cover page was marked with the squiggly signatures of professionals whose only legible features were titles such as “RN” and “MD”.

The file was dated to October of 1994 and boasted the grainy logo of an unfamiliar facility; Carrow Lake Hospital. The paperwork was slightly curled and yellowed; the leaves had developed an unwelcome coarseness in their years of

storage and the dark typeface, though readable, was powdery. “Whose is this?” she muttered aloud.

August flipped the cover page and, in that moment, she received her answer.

The upper left corner, as well as the lower half of the page, were dominated by columns of both typed and handwritten text, but it was the feature in the righthand corner, a black and white photo, that stole her attention and reduced all else on the page to a dark blur.

A pale face looked out at her from that page—a face possessed of such handsome and peaceful features it hardly seemed human. A shapely button of a nose, a smiling mouth with two full lips and sweet—though dense—eyes were on full display between two curtains of perfectly smoothed black hair. Sadie’s breath hitched in her throat at the discovery of the grainy photo.

She was looking at a face that had come to her countless times in dreams.

Her mother’s.

Surprisingly however, August’s reaction to the photo was nearly as visceral. The weathered forms rattled as his hands shook. He gingerly set the record down on the sofa and clawed up the old photos, white in the face.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, alarmed at his sudden change in demeanor.

“L-Look,” he said, shuffling through the prints and selecting one from the stack. A few seconds into his perusal, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat and loosed a strange high-pitched laugh. But then he brought it closer—till his sharp little nose nearly touched the print—and his eyes widened. All his mirth had drained away in an instant. He shot her a glance in his periphery and muttered, “Sadie... what is *this*?”

Not sure what he was referring to, she gave a cautious shake of the head. “Uh... what?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” He turned the photo in his hand so that she could see. The picture he held featured

the asylum for a background; in the fore was a group shot. A handful of men stood in the rear, dressed sharply in suits of early-twentieth-century make, while women in antiquated dresses sat in the row before them—some carrying parasols, others wearing white satin gloves. It had very obviously been taken almost a hundred years before.

“Sorry...” was her reply. “I don’t know who any of them are. I assume they might have something to do with the asylum, but...” She chuckled. “It’s an old picture. Looks like the 1920’s or 30’s to me.”

He nodded dumbly, eyes jumping from corner to corner of the old photo. “Well, I guess you didn’t look very closely, did you?” he said. “It’s certainly from that era... Somewhere in the 20’s or 30’s...” Drawing in a deep breath and clearing his throat, he dropped it onto Sadie’s lap and then pointed—rather violently—at something depicted in the print. “So, why, pray tell, is *your mother* in it?”

“Huh? What’re you on about?” Sadie snatched the picture up with a start, scrutinizing it feverishly and taking in the subjects’ faces anew. She looked at each of the seated women, but nothing in those faces struck her as particularly familiar. “Stop messing with me—”

Suddenly, she trailed off. Sadie had zeroed in on one of the subjects near the photo’s center—a lone woman seated on the grass, at the feet of the rest. She wore a flowing white dress and her long black hair, combed behind her two elfish ears, ran like oil slicks past her shoulders.

Sadie found herself gripping the corner of the photo so hard it wrinkled.

As if it were necessary to double-check, August scooped up the medical record and singled out the photo of Sadie’s mother inside. Then, easing the group picture out of her shaky grasp, he carried both to the kitchen counter, hit the light over the sink, and oscillated between the two for close to a minute, his brow knitting tighter with every pass and his expression becoming more dire. “This... this is the spookiest thing I’ve ever seen. It’s definitely her—the same woman. These

photographs were probably taken sixty or seventy years apart, but she hasn't aged a day!"

Sadie remained on the sofa. Just then, she didn't feel like she could get up.

"This is like those freaky Photoshop time-traveler pictures that turn up online, where people add iPhones to Civil War era prints. Is there a gas leak in here? Did you dose me with something?" He shivered. "That's wild. It's really her. I mean, I didn't doubt you, but... Your mother really is some kind of... of..."

Of course, she'd known her mother to be a deathless monster—but to actually compare the two photos and face visual proof of her persistence over nearly a century was shocking nonetheless. "I didn't know she was in that picture..." she muttered. "I... I don't remember seeing her in it earlier. I just briefly glanced at it before."

August crossed his legs and took to compulsively toying with the frayed cuff of his jeans. "What *is she*?"

Lacking a substantive answer to that question herself, she turned her attention to the photo's other smiling subjects. "For that matter, who're the rest of them? I thought it was just some group photo of staff members or visitors when I first saw it."

"It's possible... but the fact *she's* in it suggests otherwise, if you ask me. It's as if they're grinning because they're all in on the same joke." Like a madman unable to sit still, he rose from the sofa and returned to the kitchen. "I'll bet if we found out who these people were, we'd get some links to the cult." He studied it carefully, tonguing his molars. "I wonder if Sinistrari is in it..."

She joined him in analyzing the photo, and her scan of its grinning faces yielded yet another that pinged a latent memory. "Hold on, is that—" She singled out one of the sitters with a shaky finger. "I think that's... Margot Blake."

August gave the matter a few seconds' thought. "Mother Maggot?"



“I saw her face in the mirror we took from that house. It’s her,” she said with more certainty.

“Well, I’m not surprised. This is probably a who’s who of cult members. Look at them all, smiling ear to ear, thick as thieves. Why else would your dad have kept this picture? I’m sure it’s significant.” He allowed himself a little smile, and with the tip of his finger traced an “x” over the figure of Margot Blake. “If this is a picture of your mother and her groupies, so to speak, then we’ve already taken care of that one. How many others are still hanging around out there like Mother Maggot, trying to feed the demon more suffering?”

She recalled, not for the first time, Ophelia’s description of the matter; a black tree straining upward with countless roots. The cleaving of the tree throughout the ages had been ineffective because its foundations always remained. “There are probably many more roots to sever,” she agreed.

August checked the time. “All right... I’m going to make a call. It’s a long-shot, but let’s see if Deb wants to pick up my four hours tomorrow for a little houseboat money.” He stood and paced into the hallway, placing his call.

Though she had learnt to regard this cache of her father’s with dread, it struck her now as a massive treasure—a means for him to assist them even from beyond the grave. He had perished in an effort to confront her mother, but this research lived on. And though she couldn’t share in August’s cavalier attitude, she recognized the opportunity before them.

Her mother had been imprisoned for a quarter of a century, denied her sinister sustenance. Though free, the demon-witch of Winslow Manor would need time to marshal her strength, which left Sadie and August time enough to use the materials at hand—more abundant and illuminating than previously thought—to devise a surprise attack and put an end to the nightmare that had been raging almost a hundred years. It was possible that their only ally in this matter, Halloran, had succumbed to the fire that even now consumed his home—but he’d told her much.

A cheering bit of news came as August cut the line and sauntered back to the sofa. “Wouldn’t you know it, Debra’s willing to fill in tomorrow. Aside from Friday, she’s game to work any of my other shifts this week, too. Looks like we’ve got plans tomorrow.”

She peered down at the print of Winslow Manor on the side table and nodded. “Looks like it...”

When the storm had calmed, August set out for the night. He planned to prepare the usual supplies—lights, cameras and food—and to get some sleep before an early pick-up. “Better to head out there just after dawn. We’re going to want all the sunlight we can get.”

Alone now, but bolstered by her conversations with August, Sadie took the medical file with her to bed and sat up reading it in her pajamas. For a long moment, she studied the photo of her mother on the first page, at once horrified and oddly nostalgic for it.

Her girlhood had been spent hunting through family albums for pictures just like this one, and never having known her mother she’d longed to study her features, to know her better, however slightly. This was why, no matter the hideous truth, she could not wholly despise this photo. To look at it was to briefly relive the discoveries of her childhood in her father’s old shoeboxes of pictures, to dream of being a normal girl with two parents.

But she was aware now of a certain shadow that haunted such photos.

The photographed subject was not a woman.

This was, quite frankly, a frustrating concept, because Sophia Winslow appeared in every aspect to be a mere—albeit beautiful—woman. With the knowledge that she now ruefully possessed, Sadie thought she could make out a certain *something* smoldering in those arresting eyes that looked up

mischievously from the page, and though the image quality was rather low, a particular flavor of strangeness, of otherworldliness, was transmitted from it to the viewer with an effect at once disarming and bone-chilling.

For most individuals, to gaze upon the face of Sophia Winslow was to be distressed and attracted without quite knowing why. But Sadie knew the secret behind this arresting dichotomy. The pretty face, with its slightly dimpled cheeks and perfect skin, drew one in—but it could not wholly mask the unmentionable darkness that dwelt under it.

Where had her mother come from? Had she ever been a normal woman, or had she entered the world in this form, cut wholly from demonic cloth? As she began paging through the record, Sadie hoped she would find some answers therein. She didn't make it especially far, as fatigue overtook her and sleep stole her away unexpectedly, but she made it far enough to come away with more questions than answers.

Unable to meet the photo's gaze any longer, Sadie's eyes broke away to the left, to the printed header, which read, MEDICAL RECORD—OBSTETRICS. Beneath this, patient details such as name, date of admission, date of discharge, and more were listed.

*Sophia Winslow. Admission: October 11th, 1994, 5:50pm. Single live birth. Date of discharge: October 14th, 1994, 4:08pm.*

Her breathing grew increasingly labored as she read and re-read that list of details. Between each pass, her eyes would move back to the photo as if pleading with the smiling subject for an explanation. *She was only in the hospital for three days. I was always told that she'd died giving birth, but here's proof she was discharged from the hospital. Halloran told me the truth... she ran off with me, disappeared to the asylum...* Even though she'd been set straight by her conversations with Halloran, the facts in the record still stung—she didn't want to believe it, but wished instead to return to the fiction she'd held to since childhood. She read the document at arm's length, meditating on the opening lines for the dozenth time, uttering

the text syllable by syllable as though she were translating some dead language.

Sadie had been born on October 12th, 1994; a day after the admission reported in this medical record. She tried reading the messier script on the page, but the jargon amounted to little more than notes about routine procedure. The next page, an admission record that was thankfully typed, was more illuminating.

*10/11/94, 4:45pm: Patient arrived in triage, reports contractions less than five minutes apart. Arrived via car with father of child. Transporting to Maternal-Fetal.*

*10/11/94, 5:50pm: Patient admitted to Maternal-Fetal ward. Contractions monitored, regular. Patient is in good humor despite contractions. Dr. Marlowe paged.*

Notes of this kind continued all down the page, seeming to outline both conventional hospital procedure and a standard, healthy birth. Noted repeatedly by the nurses and doctors contributing to the record were the patient's "high spirits" and "good humor" during the process. One nurse, shortly before the birth took place, reported, "*Contractions very close together, patient reports little discomfort.*"

By all appearances, Sophia Winslow had given birth without incident.

*10/12/94, 1:01am: Natural delivery, no complications. Female child, healthy.*

Here, then, was documented Sadie's first minute on Earth. She read on with fevered interest, waiting for some note on her mother's decline that never came.

*10/12/94, 3:12am: Vitals taken*

*10/12/94, 8:02am: Vitals taken*

*10/12/94, 8:30am: Patient transported to recovery room. Father of child, his parents, present.*

Milquetoast entries made up the remainder of the admission record. The discharge record, too, contained

nothing interesting, nothing of worth. The discharging nurse had written only this in neat cursive:

*Patient is recovering remarkably—very robust constitution. Refuses pain medication on discharge. Bleeding is much reduced. No lactation difficulty. Child feeds regularly. Cleared for discharge by Dr Marlowe. Will return home with father of child.*

By every appearance, this was a record of a textbook labor and delivery; a portrait of a happy woman, her partner and their healthy infant.

There were some other documents in the mix—progress notes written by the doctor who'd come by to monitor both mother and child before discharge—but sleep came for her before she could get deep into them. She finished reading only one, and had some trouble parsing the messy script, though when she'd cracked it she came away with something truly strange.

*Staff have failed to take patient's pulse and temperature. Pulse appears too faint for easy detection and, for whatever reason, the thermometer malfunctions, reporting always a value hardly higher than room temperature. It is truly baffling, and I can only suspect that the recent batch of thermometers is defective. She appears robust, in good spirits, and in a hurry to discharge. I see no reason to keep her, but have advised her to stay another night so that we might monitor bleeding and lactation.*

*There is something else. Though she claimed in the admission questionnaire that this was her first delivery, I noticed in my pre-delivery examination certain evidences that this was not the case—in fact, signs in the cervix indicated that this woman had given birth before, quite possibly a few times. When asked about this in private, the patient merely smiled. I do not know her reasons for lying on this count, but assume she wishes to keep her past private.*

This latter find was hardly a surprise when one considered the mysterious pasts of “Sophia Winslow”. The pretty demon-witch had moonlighted as “Evelyn Renfield”, “Candice

Kellermeyer” and other names, and while play-acting as such she’d disappeared with her newborn children, never to be found. But Sadie knew, now, where those children had been taken, why they’d been spirited away, and what had become of them...

Sleep got its foot in the door and she dozed till daybreak. Her dreams were vague, impressionistic things—the scenes filled with rolling black fog and a creeping dread that something was soon to manifest. The sun chased away the fog, both the real and the dreamt, but the dread held on even as she rose and dressed for the day’s excursion.



“JUST TAKE IT!” Sadie shoved the money into his hand as they idled at the drive-thru.

“OK, OK!” He put his wallet away and handed her crumpled bills to the woman at the pick-up window. Having waited in a long line of cars at the local donut shop, she’d insisted on paying for their breakfast. It was, she maintained, the least she could do for all of his help, and she kept on thrusting the cash into his hands until his every chivalric impulse had been dashed.

With large coffees filling their cup holders and more donuts than both could comfortably hope to eat, they pulled out of the crowded lot and began a slow drive to the on-ramp that would take them toward Tiffin. August, who’d traded in his dowdy bowtie for more practical garb—jeans, boots and a dark blue canvas jacket—had put on one of his historical audiobooks for the drive, but listened to it only half-heartedly, his mind drawn away from the Albigensian Crusade and instead toward the secluded manor house they presently sought. He helped himself to a donut, sipped his coffee absently, and focused on the road ahead, lips pursed.

She, on the other hand, stuffed herself. She’d eaten close to nothing the previous day and the lack of calories had caught up with her. A Boston Creme was followed by two crullers, a chocolate glazed, an apple fritter and half of August’s cherry danish. By the half-way mark, she’d become so full of dough

and coffee that she could feel it climbing up her throat. Putting the seat back, she unearthed her father's journal and attempted to read through the remainder before they arrived, hopeful that it might contain insights into the house they would soon seek out amidst the pines.



THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT, appearing beyond the remnants of several ruined pages, had seemingly been written some weeks after the last:

*Lunch today, along with a trip to the local botanical garden. Sophie enjoyed the wildflowers and we sat at the foot of the bridge for awhile, watching the stream below.*

*Something strange happened during lunch, though. We ran to the Corner Grille for a quick bite, as it's very close to the gardens, and after we'd been seated I paid a quick visit to the bathroom. Now, at that same time, there was an older man—at least seventy years old, I think—settling his bill, and as he got up from his table, he happened to notice me and Sophie, who were seated just a little ways away. He looked at me for only a moment—but he stared at Sophie, and he did something I found very odd. His face flashed to crimson and he looked ready to burst into tears, all in the space of an instant.*

*I walked past him on my way to the restroom, and the look on his face had me a little concerned. I asked him if he was all right. He clutched my arm—the poor guy was trembling—and, still staring at Sophie, he uttered, “It's... it's... Nora...”*

*I wasn't sure what he meant by this, and looked back to Sophie, who was contentedly sipping her iced tea. I asked him if he was OK, and at the sound of my voice he blinked a few times and seemed to regain some composure. “That woman you're with,” he said, “What's her name?” I wasn't sure how much to tell him or why he was asking, but I told him her name was Sophia, and at this he finally relaxed. He patted me on the arm and offered a sheepish smile, shaking his head. And then he explained why he'd acted in such a way.*

*“That woman,” he said, “is a dead ringer for someone I used to know—and love. Her name was Nora. I haven't seen*



*her in years... many, many years. She disappeared, you see. But...*” Here, he motioned feebly at Sophie. “*The resemblance is truly uncanny. I apologize for having disturbed you. Have a good afternoon.*” He paused awhile and kept staring at Sophie, seeming to drink her in, then went up to the register.

*I felt bad for the old man, who’d mistaken Sophie for his lost love. I washed up and returned to the table, where we had a fine lunch. I didn’t think to say anything about my run-in with the old guy, but in retrospect I should’ve. I think Sophie would have gotten a kick out of it.*



THE NEXT ENTRY in the sequence was a partial one, and it appeared after several ripped pages. The beginning had been removed, but this much remained:

*...want to meet her dad. She refuses, though—and she has no interest in marriage. I keep pressing her to think about it. I told her I could save up for a ring, an apartment—that we could live together in the city, but she’ll hear none of it.*

*She wants to stay in that old house, and if we’re being honest, it isn’t fit to live in. Certainly it’s no place to bring up a baby. I insisted that we find an obstetrician for regular checkups, and I’ll be working extra to pay for them. She didn’t seem interested in that; in fact, she’s nonchalant about the whole thing. I knocked on the door last night and she merely told me the news without a hint of emotion—no giddiness or anxiety, just that same calm smile she always wears.*

*I never intended for this to happen. I spent the night a few times and admit I lost control. I asked her to let me do the right thing—to marry her. I love her, and I spend all of my free time with her anyway; I’d already been thinking about popping the question sometime down the line, but didn’t want to jump the gun. Well, the gun’s been jumped, so to speak. I want to take care of her and the baby, fulfill my responsibility to her. But she just laughs at me. I’ll convince her yet—and if I can speak to her dad, I’ll see about getting him in my corner. I haven’t told anyone but Marcus yet. Mom and dad know I’ve*

*been seeing a country girl, but they'll freak out if they hear about this.*



THE FOLLOWING ENTRY:

*SHE'LL HEAR no talk of marriage. She agreed to come along to the doctor's for a few checkups, but only because I insisted. It's bizarre—most of the women I know have been at least a little nervous about their first pregnancies, but not her. It's like she's been through this before.*

*She's been acting differently since the pregnancy, too. I don't mean to say that her mood has changed greatly—rather, she's been acting differently towards me. Prior to this, she's always seemed happy to see me, but now she hardly speaks. She's not unpleasant, but seems generally uninterested in me—like she wouldn't care a jot if I never visited again. I don't understand this change, but I don't want to come across as a needy simp, either, so I haven't said anything. I keep showing up after work, bringing food and offering to take her out. Sometimes she accepts my invitations, sometimes she isn't even home when I get there.*

*It's dumb, but I feel used—like she'd been planning this the entire time, and now that she's got a baby she no longer has any use for me.*

THE NEXT:

*I DON'T REALLY KNOW what to make of this, but I hope that in writing it down I'll be better able to get my thoughts in order.*

*I worked late tonight, till almost ten, and then drove over some groceries. I wanted to talk to her, to discuss the future, maybe, except that when I got to the house, no one answered the door. I stood out there for a good few minutes, knocking, but there was no answer. I figured she might be asleep—*

*certainly she hadn't gone out for a walk at such an hour, and she had no car to go into town with, and no phone to call a cab with.*

*Though I shouldn't have done it, I tried the door and found it unlocked. Sure enough, she wasn't in, which made me wonder where she could have possibly gone. I was concerned, and I decided to drop off the groceries and wait for her—and it occurred to me that her dad was probably inside, and that I could speak to him. Despite all my visits, I'd never managed to meet the man.*

*I came into the house and found the fire was still going in the hearth. I offloaded the groceries and then started walking through—and I used one of the old oil lanterns Sophie left all over the place to find my way to the stairs. I walked up there, started looking through the rooms, and I made sure to step heavily so as to announce myself and not spook Mr. Winslow unnecessarily.*

*But all the rooms were empty.*

*I mean it—there was no one upstairs. In one of the rooms, I did find an old wheelchair sitting against one of the windows, but there was no one up there, nor any sign that someone had been in a very long time. I went back and forth through the rooms to make sure, and the entire search left me shaken up.*

*And then I got back downstairs, to the fire, and I found Sophie sitting in front of the hearth, the soles of her feet blackened with fresh earth and her usual serene smile on her lips. I apologized for coming in uninvited and mentioned the food I'd brought. I also asked—in as unobtrusive a manner as possible—where she'd been. I could tell she'd been out walking, probably in the woods, but had no idea what could drive someone to wander barefoot in the darkness—especially a pregnant woman. It seemed awfully unsafe.*

*She replied without even looking my way, her eyes riveted to the fire. “Did you say hello to my father while I was out?” she asked—and at that moment, I heard very clearly the sounds of a wheelchair rolling across the worn floors of the*

*upper story. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the noise, and I admitted to her that I'd gone up there to look for him, but must have missed him. She nodded blandly, her mind evidently elsewhere, and thanked me for the food. I took this as a dismissal and made my way out.*

*What could she have been doing in the woods so late at night? It's not my place to control her, but... she's pregnant with my child! Is it really a good idea for her to wander off into the dark woods so close to midnight—and without any shoes on? Are there other houses around here—someone that she's been visiting while I'm gone? Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but... I know so little about her even after all this time. It's certainly possible there's someone else.*

*And what about her father? She's spoken of him—albeit very sparingly—but I haven't seen hide nor hair of him. What's more, I know there was no one upstairs. Had he been hiding from me? No—that's ludicrous. Why should he hide?*

*Something about this whole thing feels off to me, and I'm going to figure out what. I'm off tomorrow and I plan to do some digging around. I think I might ask Marcus for help, too.*

THE NEXT ENTRY:

*I'M AT A LOSS. On the one hand, I care about her. She's carrying my baby and I want things to work out between us. But on the other... the situation with Sophia has changed, and every time I find an answer to one of my questions another mystery springs up. Who is this woman, really? Where did she come from? Has she simply lived in this tottering house with her father all her life, cut-off from the world? How long has it been since this house of theirs has had running water, or electricity? I understand that some people are drawn to a more rustic sort of life, but...*

*I started my day with a trek into the hillside. I parked on the opposite side of the hills, kept the car out of view, and marched off into the pine wood. The going was hard and dark*

*—surely not the kind of terrain I'd want to explore by night, or barefoot. I was hoping that I might find another remote house thereabouts, or some clue about where Sophia's been going at night when most sensible people are asleep in bed.*

*I found something that could be taken as a clue, but I have to say I don't like where it leads.*

*It took me about two hours to fully explore the nooks and crannies between the hills, but I feel reasonably sure there are no houses in this cluster save for Winslow Manor. But in a particularly dense patch of woods, where the trees are gnarled and overgrown and filled with hornets' nests, I did stumble upon something that caught my eye.*

*In the midst of this overgrown area there was a small clearing where it was obvious many people had recently tread. The growth was thinner here, the grass clearly trampled down by numerous feet, and the spot was rank with the scent of rotting meat. The trunks of the trees bore rusty handprints left behind by bloodied hands, and though I could find no single source for that hideous odor, I did happen across several small flecks of meat strewn throughout the grass. There's very little sun in those woods—the growth is too dense, and the shaded channels between the trees are prone to fog and damp. This area smelled like a slaughterhouse after a rain—the slow degradation of meat, coupled with the stench of the earth and the pines made for a noxious combination.*

*An animal had died there, it seemed to me—and I wouldn't have given it another thought if not for the human handprints I'd found on the trees. Has someone—surely not Sophia!—been hunting animals there, perhaps skinning them? I didn't find any bones, though in some spots the earth was rather loose...*

*I avoided the house. Instead, I hiked back to the car, drove home and took a long, long shower. I plan to visit tonight. When I do, I'm going to have a talk with Sophia, tell her my mind. I'm worried about her and the baby—and about any potential future between us. I want to meet her dad and get some answers. Things aren't adding up anymore and I'm not sure why, but whenever I think about the weeks I've spent with*

*her, I get this chill running down my spine, where before there was only warmth and happiness.*

*Marcus is on board. He's going to do a little digging on Sophia and her dad. It feels gross to snoop on someone's background in this way, but what choice have I got? Even if Sophia wants to call it quits, don't I have some right to know about the mother of my child? I feel guilty, but I'm desperate to learn more about her...*

THE NEXT ENTRY followed without interruption:

*I ENDED up spending the night, but I didn't expect things to go the way they ultimately did.*

*We sat in front of the fire last night, and I told her my feelings about everything—her changes in behavior, her secrecy, our future together. I was honest with her, voiced my concerns, and hoped we could discuss them. Not surprisingly, she shrugged it all off. She's still not interested in marriage—intimated that it's simply not 'her way', whatever that means. Maybe she's part of some obscure religion with weird rules regarding marriage? If so, she didn't elaborate. She's still coming along to the doctor's appointments, but doesn't want to move into the city. And as to her secrecy, well, she only smiled that mischievous little smile of hers, and there was something dark in her eyes that told me, 'You don't want to know what I've been up to', so I dropped it. I asked how her father was, if I was ever going to get to meet him—sarcastically—and to my surprise, she pointed down the hall and said he was there with us at that very moment.*

*I had a look, and sure enough, in the moonlight, I spied a wheelchair at the opposite end of the hall. There was a man sitting in it, and though I couldn't see him clearly, I knew he was staring at me intently from the darkness. I called out to him, said hello and rose to meet him, but he rolled off suddenly into another room. I took that to mean he wasn't interested in a chat.*

*Sophia explained to me that, aside from being wheelchair-bound, he was blind and deaf—which I found especially peculiar, since I was been sure he'd been staring at me. I let the man be and tried to continue my earnest chat with Sophia, but I confess I got really tired at that moment. I've been working a lot of overtime lately, trying to save up for the baby, and I guess I was just feeling gassed, because I drifted off on the floor, right then and there, beside her.*

*And when I woke up, maybe ten minutes later, she was gone.*

*I stood up, called out to her, but there was no reply. I figured she'd gone and fixed herself a snack, or to check on her father, but a quick walk around the first floor showed me I was alone there. Her father, who'd been rolling around in his wheelchair just minutes previously, was nowhere in sight—and I admit it baffled me. Had she carried him back upstairs? Was there some ramp leading to the upper story I was unaware of?*

*I stepped outside, walked the perimeter of the house, thinking she'd stepped out for some fresh air, but I saw no trace of her as I stared into those black woods.*

*But I did hear things coming from deep in the hills just then.*

*There were howls unlike those of any local animal—or any animal I'm familiar with, in fact. They sounded as though they were coming from something huge, something angry. There were chants, too; low, consistent chants, as of many people in quiet prayer or song. I couldn't make out what was being said, but the din of their voices, in tandem with the wild animalistic noises, struck me dumb with fear.*

*Something was happening deep in the woods—something I probably had no business exploring. I thought to go in there, to see if Sophia had wandered in or was in trouble, but by the time I gathered the nerve, the howling and chanting had stopped, and I heard someone walking out of the woods, toward the house. It was her.*

*I panicked and ran back inside because I didn't want her to find me gawking at the treeline, and I curled up next to the*

*fire, pretending I was still asleep. She came into the house without a sound and laid down next to me, closed her eyes, and acted as if she'd never left my side. When I stirred a few minutes later, she opened her eyes—they were darker than usual, and I noticed the firelight didn't reflect in them. She fed me that same cruel smile. She leaned in and kissed me, hard enough to make my lower lip bleed, and I nearly threw up.*

*That smell of rotting meat I'd encountered in the hills clung to her like perfume—and when she placed her lips against mine, I felt my own mouth flooded with it.*

*I don't know what she's gotten involved in. I don't want to speculate too much, but it's pretty clear she's mixed up in something weird—cult-like. Is she a Satanist? Is this some kind of New Age thing? I'm hoping that Marcus can help me get to the bottom of it. That's totally his wheelhouse.*

*I didn't sleep a wink the rest of the night. I pretended, kept my eyes closed, but every time I chanced a peek at her in the firelight, I found her awake and smiling at me. I think she knew I was faking—that I was frightened. And I can't shake the feeling that, for whatever reason, she liked it.*



“OK, I think this is it,” said August, pointing through the windshield to the road ahead. On the horizon there appeared a swell of hills, and peppered all about them were numerous shaggy pines. “Now, the question is... where do we park?”

Sadie tucked the journal into her bag and rolled down the window to sample the cool country air. If the recent storms had had any positive effect, it was the introduction of a pleasing chill to the wind. Still in a daze for all she’d read, she appraised the heap of green hills and shrugged. “I guess we can just get close to it and then park on the shoulder.”

“Tell you what,” he replied, cutting the volume on his audiobook, “I’m going to drive a circuit around the spot and see. If there’s no road, I guess we’ll hoof it.” He glanced at her in his periphery, clearing his throat. “So, uh... anything interesting in that book of yours?”

“Interesting isn’t the word I’d use,” she said, offering a little smile. “Mostly, it just reinforces what Halloran told me—boy meets girl, girl winds up pregnant, girl starts acting weird and boy wonders what’s going on.” She laughed in spite of herself. “I know how the story turns out—the ending is a disappointment.”

He nodded. “Well, unless I’m mistaken there are a few chapters left, no? We can fix up the ending here and now.”

“Let’s hope so.” Sadie drank in the cool air and cradled herself in the passenger seat, watching as the cluster of hills

came into sharper relief. Her gaze bounced from one tree to the next, in search of phantoms leering between the blackish trunks, and then to their soaring canopies, above which she did discover something of note. “Look,” she said, extending a finger through the crack in the window, “there’s smoke.”

August leaned forward and studied the distance with a nod. “Seems that way. Chimney’s going, huh?” He wagged his brows for comedic effect, but failed to hide the anxiety that now sprang through his thin form and rendered his voice a little unsteady. “Someone might be home after all.”

For her part, Sadie looked upon the wild assemblage of hills and trees with a kind of wonder. It had been in this remote place that her mother and father had first met, and the thought that she might—after a quarter century of complete ignorance—have a chance to explore a site so pivotal to her own existence struck her as a profound opportunity. Her pulse quickened, her eyes widened, and she felt herself reliving her father’s own journey to the house so many years previous.

August turned right at the next intersection, continuing around the mess of hills but finding no road leading into them. It was not until he’d taken another right, and had begun to grow impatient, that he singled out a feature in the scenery that piqued his curiosity.

But it was not a road.

Parked upon the shoulder, within a few feet of a drainage canal, was a small sedan. At sighting it, August sped up till he’d arrived within a stone’s throw and hit the brakes. Stopped now, he appraised the vehicle—which sat empty—and wagered aloud, “How much you wanna bet this car’s been here awhile?”

“What makes you sat that?”

August pulled ahead of the other car, parked, and hopped out. Walking around the sedan, hands on his hips, he took it all in, declaring, “Flat tire, a handful of leaves and seed pods have accumulated near the wipers, and...” He knelt down, pointing at the rear passenger-side wheel. “There’s a bird’s nest in this

tire well. This car's been here at least a week or two. Maybe longer.”

“Why?” she asked, though she feared she already had some inkling of the answer. “You think they got a flat and just abandoned it, or...” Sadie turned to the hills, to the tendril of smoke that rose up above the crowns of the trees. “Do you think that...”

“Yeah,” he replied, finishing her thought. “If I were a betting man, I’d say the driver got a flat, went looking for help and possibly made his way to that house. If he saw the smoke rising, it’s possible he was drawn to it. Then again, I could be wrong. It’s just as possible the owner doesn’t have money for a tow and hasn’t come back for it yet.” He tapped the license plate with the tip of his shoe. “Out of State plates, too. I suppose hauling this thing a State or two over might cost a bundle, so perhaps the owner just hasn’t gotten around to it.”

She peered at the car ruefully, then turned once more to the crowded hillside. “Do you *really* think that’s what happened? This car stopped *here* of all places, after all...”

“I *want* to believe it,” he replied, hands in his pockets. “If we could explore some place and *not* find another body, well, that’d be pretty grand.”

“What should we do? Should we call someone about the car? The State Highway Patrol?”

“Not yet,” he said, taking a step back toward his car and popping the trunk. “We should have a look around the house and make sure the driver didn’t run into trouble. If we find a body, we may as well combine the calls, you know? It’s more efficient to call in a homicide *and* an abandoned vehicle at once, I think.” He hauled a backpack from the trunk and rifled through it to make sure he’d sufficiently prepared.

“What’d you bring this time?”

He yanked a coil of rope from the bag and gave it a shake. “Rope, for starters.”

“We’re going to... tie her up?”

He shrugged. “I mean, you have a better idea? If we manage to get the jump on her and restrain her while she’s still weak, we can bury her in a ditch or something. It worked for your dad and Halloran, right?”

She frowned. “And did you bring a shovel?”

A little red in the face, he failed to reply to that. “I *did* bring some snacks, water, first aid kit... flashlights, camera... Maybe, if you don’t hassle me too much, I’ll even share them with you. I only packed a single bag of supplies this time. We’re only going into a house—I don’t imagine we’ll be splitting up a whole lot, so no need to overpack. I’ll play the part of pack mule.”

“*How gallant.*” She looked to the hills beyond, her expression growing tired in anticipation of the trek. “So... we’re walking?”

“Yeah,” said August, pointing up at the sky. “If there were a road, we’d have seen it by now. And even then, with all the storms, it’d probably be a mud pit. I’m not trying to get my own car stuck in the muck. Weather’s nice right now, but we’re in for more rain, too, remember? Let’s just get a move on.”

Arms folded, she joined him in stepping past the drainage ditch and into the open field.

“So, anything stand out to you in that journal? Did your dad have much to say about the house? Any details we should know about?”

She shook her head. “Not really. There are a lot of pages missing. There’s just enough detail left to get the gist of his relationship with my mother. The house isn’t mentioned a whole lot, except he wrote that it was shabby even back then. No electricity, no running water.”

“Oof. Really roughing it then, huh?”

“Seems that way.” Her gaze narrowed against the cool breeze. “He mentioned, too, seeing another figure in the house, a wheelchair-bound man, blind and deaf, who my mother

referred to as her father. I don't think it was really her father, though... Rather, I think it may have been Sinistrari."

August sat on this development for a time, then said, affecting enthusiasm, "*Boy*, we get two horrors for one in this joint, eh?"

She went on. "My father mentioned, too, that things were going on in these woods at night. He'd come to visit my mother in the evenings, only to find the house empty. Then, one night, while he slept, she snuck out and he heard terrible noises coming from the woods."

"Some kind of... ritual or something? Like the kinds of things they used to get up to at the asylum in the 20's?"

"Probably." She gulped. "At this point in the journal, my dad doesn't know what's really going on. He thinks that my mother was mixed up in some sort of cult... not that she was, you know..."

"She wasn't just in a cult, she was *leading* one, being worshipped by 'em. I imagine all of that must have come as a pretty rude shock."

The ground began to swell and their steps became more labored. They had begun their ascent into the hills, and after some calculation had picked what appeared to them as the shortest one. Even this tried their legs, however—the ground, which had not yet returned to its pre-storm dryness, clung to their soles and threatened to rob them of their footwear. Gnats visited them in clouds, and it was only in holding their breath that they avoided inhaling the lot of them. She was reminded as they grunted and climbed of their visit to Beacon Hill. The hillocks here were of a much sharper gradient however, and would lead them to some place even more hidden, more unheard-of...

Her heart palpitated as she climbed, and not merely for the effort. Her cheeks flushed and her neck began to tingle as she fought to keep the column of chimney smoke in her sights. *This is the house where your mother lived. And she may very well be waiting for you inside... After all these years, you may get to meet her...*

This latter thought froze her blood, but all the same she couldn't purge the curiosity attending the possibility. At Beacon Hill, and at Rainier Asylum, she and August had faced the unknown, had pitted themselves against the demons of her mother's nighted past, but now they were drawing close to something very special—something unexpected. The house they knew to wait just over the crest of this hill quite possibly contained the fountainhead from whence all these horrors and sleepless nights had sprung.

"You feeling OK?" he asked, noticing that her breathing had grown quite labored—more labored, it seemed, than their exertion demanded.

She couldn't reply, merely nodded in a fit, lips pursed and chest heaving. Clutching a pine branch, she pulled herself up a few more paces and then jogged up the remainder of the hill, calves burning and breath sparse. Sadie Young stood upon that hill and stared down into the tree-choked pocket below with a kind of nauseous triumph.

There, just barely visible between the breaks in the foliage, was the house her mother had lived in. Tears came to her eyes as she spied the upper edge of its leaning chimney stack, though she couldn't say why. While she stood at gaze, regaining her breath, she thought of her father—and fancied she heard his voice on the wind as it wound through the pines. Summoned to mind were the last words of his she'd recently read in the journal—

*I think she knew I was frightened. And I can't shake the feeling that, for whatever reason, she liked it.*

**T**he ancient tenement was well and truly nestled within the explosion of pine needles below. Trees grew at strange angles along the hillside as though straining to camouflage it, and if not for the chimney that loosed the ceaseless thread of smoke into the sour skies, one could not even be sure that a house stood there.

August was the first to begin descending, and he did so with measured steps, lest he tread upon a murky patch and slide the rest of the way. He braced himself against trees, frowning at the sap that clung to his fingers, and made slow progress downhill. “How in the world did this house get here?” he asked, straining to make out its borders through the crowded thickets. “Who could possibly live in a place like this, so out of the way?”

“Someone with secrets to keep,” she replied, and with weak knees she started down after him.

At Beacon Hill, Sadie had tasted true fear. Its shadow-blackened halls, and the maggot-ridden specter that walked its floors, had terrified her. At Rainier Asylum, she had suffered an almost kaleidoscopic array of horrors, and had been left doubting her own senses. Here, though, as they approached the lonesome manor house, she was struck by something else completely.

*Danger.*

It was a smaller house than the one on Beacon Hill, and far less spacious than the old asylum, but somehow its humble

size managed to transmit a more threatening aura than the others. The sparse glimpses they stole of the tree-bound hermitage, parceled out by the shifting of tree limbs in the breeze, resulted time and again in a manifold increase of ulcer-inducing dread.

August lost his footing and slid down a little ways, the seat of his pants growing muddy and a string of curses leaving his lips. “Guess it’ll be laundry day when we get back,” he muttered, rising to his feet with a groan. He extended a hand to help her down the rest of the way, and then they paced on, starting into the semi-level valley upon which the house was situated. Certain parts of the decline sat lower in the ground than others, resulting in stagnant pools that would prove perfect breeding grounds for mosquitos. They sidestepped these, keeping to the mucky patches between, and fought their way past the brush toward the house. The chimney was no longer in view, but between the trees other aspects of the house entered into dim relief.

The house’s concealment had been further aided by a layer of green ivy that coated its outer walls and eaves as tightly as an autumn sweater, and the woody black vines stood out like the veins of some amorphous creature drawing sustenance from the structure itself. A shattered window came and went from view as the undergrowth shifted in the wind, and what it had lost in glass it had more than regained in foliage, for its pane had been wreathed in ivy and the searching black tendrils had crept in, taking root upon the inner walls. The whole thing had the appearance of a hollow wound.

She paused, feeling overwhelmed by the effusion of green all around her, and canvassed the surrounding trees. Sadie peered up at the canopy, and was distraught at how little of the sky was visible just then. “It’s so dark here,” she mumbled, loosing an involuntary shudder.

“Some things like the dark—flourish in it,” offered August, grinding to a halt and seeming to focus on the wind. He gripped the straps of his backpack tightly and took a slow, deep breath through his nose. “I think we’re close,” he said in a near whisper. “You ready?”



It was clear from the way he spoke that he was merely trying to put off visiting the house—that he was searching for any excuse to prolong their waffling in the brush. She didn't give him one, replying, "Let's get it over with."

Sadie took the lead this time, ducking beneath the boughs of several pines and coming away with green needles in her raven hair. Quite suddenly, and without her realizing it, she came face-to-face with the house, emerging so close to it that she very nearly bumped its ivy-strangled walls with her nose.

August stepped out of the trees a few paces to her left, and marveled silently at the broken window she'd earlier glimpsed. He stared into it with wide eyes, his features shrinking back into ungainly apprehension, and then turned to her with a shake of the head.

She took this to mean there wasn't much to look at in the room beyond and so pointed to her right. "Let's come around this way, find the front door." She was in no condition to give orders, much less to follow them, but recent exposures to fear had taught her how to momentarily override her hesitations and she began mechanically from the window, venturing around the corner.

Try as they might to approach softly, their silence was thwarted by the cracking of twigs beneath their feet. Every pop and snap added pounds to the air till the going was so hard they weren't sure their hearts could bear the burden. They had come to hunt the wolf in its own den, and there was no room for clumsiness, no opportunity to regain the element of surprise once it was lost. Nonetheless, their every move, no matter how carefully placed, appeared destined to give them away. The wolf was bound to catch their scent at any moment, and then—

"The door," uttered August, pointing ahead as they turned the corner.

They had come round to the front of Winslow Manor, and a moment's study was all she needed to confirm its likeness against the photo she'd run across in her father's journal. There could be no doubt that she presently stood before the

same house; decades of accumulated ivy, of weathering, of stewing in this primordial dark and damp, could not altogether rob it of its trademark shape—though these corrupting forces had, by the looks of it, very much tried.

There were, as yet, no clear signs of habitation to be seen aside from the chimney smoke. Their careful study of the outside, their minutes of silent listening, showed no evidence of activity within or without the house, and yet its hideous air persisted without pause or challenge. Looking into the dark recesses of the house through a nearby window, Sadie was reminded of a passage in her father's journal, where he'd detailed seeing her mother seated in a chair, with her neck bent back at an unnatural angle and her eyes open wide. It had been such a strange image—chilling in its abnormality—and she couldn't help wondering whether the house was presently home to such an idle tenant, engaged in that same kind of demonic brooding.

She turned for the dozenth time back to the trees, combed their ranks for phantoms or staring eyes, but was left empty-handed—and empty-headed, for she saw now that the house's black door had been left ajar, and felt a spike of fear seize her heart. The feeble door, worn down by many winters, creaked playfully on its hinges as the wind passed through, almost as if beckoning to her.

August set a hand on her shoulder and gave her a little shake. "Are you OK?"

She hadn't realized it, but her legs had grown unsteady and her face had gone bone white. "Y-Yeah," she breathed out without a whiff of persuasiveness.

The look in his eyes was very dire—his cheeks were burning red and his fiery hair had been left tousled by the constant wiping of his brow. Teeth grit, he stepped past her and made his way to the entrance. "It's too early to say, but... if she were here don't you think we'd know it?"

Sadie fell into step behind him, hands in her pockets and shoulders so tense her upper body felt fossilized. "I don't know... maybe she *wants* us to go inside..."

August reached into his pack and yanked out his flashlight with one hand. It was a long one, with a solid steel body, and judging by the way he held it in his fist, it was clear he didn't merely intend to use it for light. "I'll switch on the camera when we get in there," he whispered, "but if your mother is here, I should be able to see her with my own two eyes, right?"

She nodded.

He started for the door and she followed behind like a dog dragged on its leash. The shuffling of the misty pine boughs in the breeze saw them pause in their advance no less than twice, terrified that a threat had manifested from amongst them, but their jittery paces brought them to the entrance unscathed—save for the toll on their nerves. August used his flashlight hand to slowly ease the door open, and then carefully plumbed the inner darkness of a dim, damp-smelling foyer.

The house was in a state of loathsome decrepitude, home to all manner of invasive flora and timid insects, but when the last of the wooly spiders had disappeared behind the yawning gap in the baseboards, all was still. Sadie stood on tiptoe in the doorway, peering breathlessly over August's shoulder, and followed the black lines of vines that had staked claims across the walls, eyed the stringy, many-fronded weeds that had strived through many seasons through the whorls in the floor. The surrounding woods had long ago overcome this place, were in the process of gradually transforming it; and so too had the surrounding woods been blighted, made all the more sinister, by this spoilt hermitage. The blending and blurring of house and nature would continue till both were indistinguishable from each other.

To the right of the foyer, from a room they hadn't yet found the nerve to explore, there arose a clatter. Something seemed to faintly strike the walls—a sound at once hollow and fleshy—and then to break into a fit of spasmodic fluttering. August white-knuckled the flashlight and—lips subtly quivering—rushed in.

She entered just behind him, the warped boards beneath their feet sagging at their combined weight, and saw what his

light unearthed in the space to the right—a moss-grown dining room.

A small, dark bird had at some point entered the house, and presently sailed about the room in wild arcs, its tiny body striking the walls and floor as it flailed in confusion for an exit that was mere feet away. The tiny creature worked hard at its own destruction, rushing up to the ceiling with a series of dreamy flaps, only to strike the crumbling plaster and crash to the floor with a hollow flop. Its feathers were out of sorts, its black eyes wide in the yellow cone of the flashlight. The bird rolled to its side, legs twitching excitedly, and then took flight for a few seconds more. Meeting the wall with such an impact that both onlookers startled, the thing finally hit the ground and remained still—and just beyond it, in the dimly-lit recesses of what might have been a sitting room with a lit hearth, there appeared a heap of others.

A dozen birds at least—ravens, Mourning Doves and less recognizable species—littered the tired floors, and the carpet of disheveled plumage gave rise to so many buzzing flies and other hangers-on as to give the impression of a united, shifting whole.

The redness of August's face had been traded for a different, sicker shade, and blocking a retch with his forearm, he paced slowly into the dining room, peering into the bird-crowded chamber beyond. "What in the world?" He gulped back a surge of illness and squeezed his eyes shut. "What happened to these things? The door's right over there. Why didn't they fly out?"

Sadie had been wondering the same thing—and drawing a parallel between herself and these poor, doomed creatures. *We're just two more birds stuck inside this house. We know where the door is, but... that didn't seem to help the others, did it?*

Save for a few slanted, mouldering shelves, the sitting room was almost completely empty. The fireplace housed a modest little fire, recently stoked, and above the mantel hung a framed painting of some lush hillside, probably European.

The pair gave the room as thorough a study as they could bear from the doorway, not daring to walk past the undulating heap of carrion, and then drew back into the dining room. It was with a sharp inhalation that Sadie recalled they hadn't looked to their left upon entering—and at turning back to the foyer her heart shriveled into a convulsing knot.

In the room beyond the foyer, slumped to one side in a rusted wheelchair of antiquated make, was a human figure draped in dense gauze from head to toe. It was difficult to make out the precise characteristics of the one who wore the sack garment, but when August's light reached the chair-bound figure, an effusion of golden blond hair was much in evidence beneath. The slumping mass was still as a mannequin—as a *corpse*.

Sadie's stomach sank as she beheld the silhouette and took a few shaky steps toward it. "August... Do you see that? I-I think... that's a woman. Could it be that car we saw—the one on the side of the road... was *hers*?" Her voice barely rose above a whisper, and the utterance of every word was a struggle against the chatter of her teeth.

What happened next overshadowed August's shallow nod of agreement.

The body in the chair *jerked*. The rusted metal whined as the clothbound figure swayed violently to the left. Then, rearing back so that its veiled face was bared at the ceiling, it clutched the moth-eaten armrests and loosed a monstrous shriek like the cries of so many panicked birds. Black, beady eyes stood out beneath the gauze-like material, and a great fluttering from beneath the sack set the whole figure quivering as if it had swallowed live birds and was still tortured from within by their last wingbeats.

The door slammed shut and they were robbed of the sparse daylight the entryway had afforded them, while the fluttering, sack-garbed figure shot to its unseen feet, still crowing like a klaxon. Its shoulders heaved as it shrieked, and the shrill cries rebounded off the walls, seized upon their ears till every other sound was completely overcome.

August made a mad dash for the door, grasped the rust-pitted handle, but to his stupefied surprise, the thing wouldn't budge. That mouldering door they had passed through only minutes before was now one with its frame, and of a density closer to steel than the weatherbeaten fixture they'd earlier found sitting ajar. Still, he tugged at it like a maniac, placed a foot against the wall and threw his entire weight behind the effort. Though the handle rattled in his hand, the thing would not budge.

And in these small instants where August had made his gambit, the squawking monstrosity in the room beyond had drawn nearer. Slowly, it had turned its veiled face to meet them, had set its beady black eyes on them, and had taken shambling steps on pale, vein ridden feet whose bluish digits peeked out from underneath the ruffled ends of its strange garb.

Startled by its approach, she yanked on August's arm and pointed. "August, it's coming!"

Having had no luck with the door and his boyish cheeks left burning for his mad effort, August dropped his pack on the floor and, seeming to weigh the flashlight still clutched in his fist, placed himself between Sadie and the looming figure. "Stay back!" he ordered, brandishing the flashlight like a club.

The figure did not desist. Its wayward gait brought it stumbling toward him at alarming speed.

Driven by panic, August took a wild swing.

The flashlight met the crown of the figure's head and the garment was ripped away. What was revealed beneath was not a human being, but rather a mass of black, screeching birds. They flew in maniac arcs from the cloth that had contained them and spread out across the room, sailing into walls like the countless others had done.

The two of them shielded themselves from the onslaught, covering their faces with their arms and listening to the the drumbeat of avian bodies striking surrounding fixtures before they fluttered and grew still. She felt the feathers brush against

her, a talon in her hair, and dropped to the floor. She remained there in a tight crouch till all was silent once more.

August let go of the flashlight. His hand was shaking too badly to keep it in his grip, and he fell to one knee beside her. “Y-You OK?” he asked, panning across the room and taking great, heaving breaths.

She knocked feathers from her clothing and palmed at her hair, her tremulous voice rearing its head by small degrees. “W-What was that?” she whispered.

He licked his lips and recovered the flashlight, holding it to his chest and wringing it out in his fists. “I feel like we just tripped the alarm system.”

Sadie looked back at the door, and felt the breath vacate her lungs at finding it still preternaturally sealed. From there, she glanced past him, into the room from whence the thing had first shambled, and noticed another odd change in the scenery.

The old wheelchair it had been sitting in was no longer in sight.

**T**hus they found themselves locked within the ghoulish manor house, and it seemed impossible to them that a place so given over to nature and abandonment should possess such a stifling air as this—a thick air that one had to sip rather than inhale, an unyielding atmosphere one could navigate strictly by careful wading. Behind the newfound silence simmered a growing dread, the gut-ache of a nervy errand that had devolved in the space of some few moments into a waking nightmare. Everything in sight was infused to a greater or lesser degree with the richness of terror; from the filthiest corner of floor to the orange-yellow glow issuing from the sitting room behind them, nothing escaped the miserable stamp of blackest corruption.

They were like the birds now, the two of them, the slow drip of panic ensuring fruitless flight from room to room in search of escape. Unless their fortunes differed greatly from those of the poor creatures, the only choice ahead of them was which corner of the accursed house they preferred to die in.

Sadie's heart clambered in her chest even as the final wingbeats died out and only the popping of the hearth pierced the quiet. Further on, from some deeper space, she thought she could make out evidences of natural light—likely from the broken, vine-wreathed windows they'd noticed on their way inside. "Maybe we'll find some other door back this way..." She sighed, eyes darting this way and that in anticipation of another assault. "What do you think that *thing* was?"



He mulled the question over while plumbing the depths of a narrow corridor and unearthing the edge of a staircase with his light. “It wasn’t a ghost—not the normal kind, anyway. I was able to see it. But when I struck it, it disappeared. I don’t know what it was, but...” The dust got the better of him and he fought back a sneeze. “This *is* Sinistrari’s house. If he was versed enough in the occult to bring a demon into the world, I imagine some terrifying vision like that wouldn’t be out of his reach. I wish your buddy Halloran were here; maybe he’d be able to explain what it was.”

She nodded. “The house could just be playing tricks on us, too. Like the asylum did.”

August held the flashlight in a white fist, the textured handle leaving an imprint across his palm and fingers. “Well, whatever it was, it’s safe to say we’re up the creek with no paddle. What’s the next move?” he asked. “If Sinistrari’s research, or some other clue into his work, still remains here, where can we find it?”

“It’s hard to say. Looking at this place, it’s hard to believe that anything like that could possibly be preserved. Everything here is crumbling, decaying. We may have just walked into a trap for nothing...” Cradling herself in her arms, she muttered, “Let’s see what we find this way,” and led him from the dismal foyer into the adjoining chamber.

It was a nondescript room, completely unfurnished and black as night. Leaks from above had made significant inroads into the space, painting the walls of dusty plaster with a gangrenous palette. A knot of black legs throbbed in one corner, heavily encrusted with generations of spider’s silk, and in another sufficient walling had crumbled away to reveal warped studs. Their steps awakened something, which scurried off noisily through channels in the sub-flooring till it fell completely from hearing.

This little room opened the way to still others however, and immediately across from them appeared a squalid kitchen. It had been from there that the faint daylight had earlier been spotted, though it proved so sparse—a mere few rays emerging from between the enjoined fingers of the woods

outside—that it illuminated almost nothing within. When their careful steps brought them into the kitchen, it was only slow passes of August’s flashlight that made examination of the space possible.

The window, they discovered, had been swollen over from the outside by woody growth, and the vegetal scab offered only a pinhole through which they might sample the daylight. The house was just like any other organism; at its invasion by foreign bodies, it closed itself off completely and would now burn hot with fever till it had overcome them. Whether they could hope to withstand the house’s defenses remained to be seen, but the stealth with which it had responded to their presence bespoke a sentience that should never exist in inanimate things.

It was exposed piping and crumbling countertops that clued them in to the fact the room had once functioned as a kitchen—and these were the only hints, for all else had been reduced to powdery rubble. A good portion of the ceiling had fallen away, revealing sporadic gaps between the first and second floors where careless steppers throughout the latter would surely plummet. How long had the building been in this awful state? Surely it had looked better than this when her father had first happened upon it?

The kitchen branched off to the right and left into two further rooms—on the left, a cramped laundry room whose only tenant was a crooked utility basin, and, to the right, what could only be called a small library. It was the library that drew their attention most—with three of its narrow walls hung in ceiling-high shelves and little more than cobwebs strewn about them. A hundred books, perhaps two, might have once filled the shelves of handsome wood, but now they sat empty—as did the lonesome little desk on the far end, with its dusty face and uneven metal legs. They stood in this dark hovel, scanning its mold-blighted recesses with the light.

“Was this Sinistrari’s library?” asked Sadie.

August offered a half-nod. “I think so. This was where he did his research, I guess—where he brushed up on the dark

arts.” With a little frown, he added, “Guy wasn’t much of a decorator, though.”

The utter lack of furnishings throughout the house baffled her. Sure, it had been some years since the place had been truly occupied, but what had become of Sinistrari’s belongings—of her mother’s? However damaged and desolate, the hermitage seemed as though it had been manipulated by some unseen hand, its contents purged as if to protect the identities of its former owners. The far-reaching cult helmed by Sinistrari might have been responsible for it—or else what little of value there had been in the house had been carried off by wanderers.

“If this was his study, there’s nothing left in it for us to use,” he muttered, kneading his brow. “There may be more to see down here, or else we can focus on the upstairs, though I’m not liking the look of those floors. They’re too unstable, and the sub-flooring looks rotten in some places. Maybe,” he continued softly, “we should just forget about it and focus on getting out of here while there’s still time.”

“You want to try and break out?” she asked. The thought had occurred to her, though recalling August’s previous attempt to open the door, she saw nothing but futility in it. The dark forces that held sway over this house would not let them go free so easily as that. “Let’s keep looking. If we exhaust every other option, we’ll try and bust the door down or something.”

He offered a defeated nod and stepped out of the tiny library. “OK, let’s see what turns up near the stairs, then.”

She lagged behind him by several paces, surveying the wreckage of the kitchen and marveling at the holes in the ceiling. She strode back the way they’d come, letting August judge the state of the stairs while she studied the bleak corridor joining the stairwell to the foyer. There, she encountered something they’d overlooked on their previous walk past—a small door. *A closet?* The door was firmly shut, and the cobwebs that had settled across the jamb told her it had not been opened in ages.

She had been prepared to leave the little door behind and meet August by the stairs when a noise—a furtive stirring—saw her pause. The sound, issuing from within the sealed closet, did not strike her as that of a mouse or other animal; there was a subtle creaking of the floors, as of something more substantial shifting its weight. Not a little nervous, Sadie placed an ear to the door, wondering what could lay behind it.

It was then that she heard the voice.

It was a soft, cooing voice, only tenuously masculine. “*You should open the door.*”

She held her breath, joints freezing up in fright.

“*I think you should open the door,*” continued the hidden speaker. The disembodied voice was at once breathy and amused—though more insistent than it had been the first time.

Sadie couldn’t find her voice to make a reply, but began shaking her head in a silent refusal to comply.

“*OPEN THE DOOR,*” came the voice. The utterances remained a whisper, but were spoken so close to the door that the wood began to vibrate.

She watched as the door handle started to tremble, as the mechanism began to turn from the other side. Instinctively, she reached out and grabbed it, giving it a hard twist in the opposite direction so as to keep it shut.

“*OPEN THE DOOR. OPEN IT! OPEN IT!*”

Sadie pressed her shoulder to the door as it began rattling against its frame. The brassy knob shook in her palm as she forced it shut.

August, pacing back from the direction of the stairs, looked at her strangely. “Hey, what’s the matter?” he asked.

No sooner had he spoken did the door cease its rumbling. Sadie drew in a shaky breath and, keeping one hand pressed to the thing, looked at him with wide eyes. “There’s... there’s someone in there. I heard them—and they tried to come out just now.”

August nodded, then crept toward her, holding his flashlight by one end like a bludgeon. Carefully, he stepped in front of her and took hold of the door handle. Then, when she'd had a chance to move a few steps away, he yanked open the dust-heavy door and prepared to crack its occupant across the skull.

Dust motes filled the air as the long-shut door was opened, but little else emerged from what they now saw was a small broom closet. Spiders made their home in the space, but it was otherwise empty. He turned back toward her and arched a brow. "You... you're sure you heard something in *here*?"

She looked into the closet for a beat, nodding absently. "Y-Yeah, it was from in here. I'm sure of it."

He shrugged, shutting the door and motioning back toward the stairs. "Well, anyway, those stairs look pretty rough. I don't trust them. I think we're better off sticking to the ground floor. No telling what'll happen if we stomp around up there too long."

"I see..." She wandered down the remainder of the hall and took a look at the stairs herself. The steps were crumbling in many places, and the surviving boards were heavily warped. She had to agree with his judgement; no good would come from venturing upstairs. As she peered up into the second story, she caught sight of something—only for an instant—that set her teeth on edge and made her spine tingle.

Eyes—*staring* eyes—had been fixed on her from just around that dark corner. She had spied them, along with the outline of a figure crawling hastily in retreat across the floors. The silhouette had disappeared without a sound, and had moved as deftly as a house centipede on hands and feet. She hadn't managed a very good look, but it had rendered her shaken all the same.

"You OK?" asked August, pausing to study the camera's viewfinder. "I thought I got a little blip there, but the screen calmed down."

"Uh... yeah," she replied.

Unconvinced, August took another peek up the stairs and then lowered the camera, nodding back to the foyer. “Well, let’s keep looking around, yeah? Maybe there’s a basement. Could be something in that sitting room, where the fire is, too.” He started down the hall and she followed him limply, as if in a trance.

Perhaps, once, the sitting room had been inviting.

There would have been a handsome rug at room's center; she could picture it now where only warped, dusty boards dwelt. The settee would have been mold-free, a great place to curl up in front of the fire with a book, and the two large shelves built into the wall, in much the same style as they'd appeared in Sinistrari's old office, would have held no few of them.

But there were no rugs here, no fripperies. Upon entering, they'd had to step very carefully so as not to disturb the oozing tangle of beaks and feathers at the threshold. The fire, a very small thing which threw off unsubstantial warmth, offered light enough to brighten the putrid room's recesses. It was there that they chose to idle, staring up at the framed painting hanging over the mantel.

"Think ol' Sinistrari was an art collector?" asked August when the silence got to be too much for him to bear.

Her eyes took a stroll across the canvas. It was a rectangular work housed in a grotty frame some four feet long and two feet high, give or take, and featured what she could only describe as an uninspired landscape. Had the painting not been marred by years of soot and dust, it might have retained something of prettiness, or else some now-hidden aspect of the artist's work might have been more apparent. As it hung now, there was simply nothing to it. It was a picture of a rolling hillside, probably completed in an afternoon by a novice with

far too many glasses of wine in them and too heavy a hand. “If he was,” she finally replied, “he had zero taste.”

August studied the painting more closely, pointing out a small, dirt-blotted squiggle in the lower-right. “If I’m not mistaken, these are the artist’s initials. *A.S.*, it says.” He arched a brow. “How about that? Our friend Sinistrari was a jack-of-all-trades, huh? By night he summons cannibalistic demon-witches, but in the afternoons he works on bad Bob Ross knockoffs.”

This earned him a chuckle, though it occurred to her that their brief conversation was the only sound they’d heard in quite some time. There’d been no bumps, no creaks, no disembodied voices whatsoever; the house was quiet as a tomb. Had she not seen this fire burning before her, had she not been threatened by the ghoulish, gauze-bound figure or heard the beckoning whispers of that other phantom, she might have mistaken the place as empty.

This house, hidden in the pines like a serpent, had been many things over the years, but it had never been empty.

“If we’re not going upstairs, then what can we hope to do?” she asked. “It was a long-shot, hoping to find Sinistrari’s materials intact. Prior to coming here I didn’t have a clear idea of what we were looking for, but now that we’re in the thick of it I don’t think there’s anything here to find in the first place. It’s empty.” She motioned to the shelves in the room. “Unless they were hidden somewhere, books and papers would have fallen to pieces by now, and so far, in the journal, my father hasn’t mentioned anything like a library. He probably didn’t have many opportunities to tour the house and take a thorough look around, but...”

“We can take another pass,” he suggested, panning around the room with the camera. “We’ve been pretty much everywhere in the downstairs, but there could be a door we missed, a crawlspace, something like that.”

“A *crawlspace*?” She frowned. “There could be a basement, but if there’s a crawlspace I’ll gladly let you take the lead on *that*.”



He paused, gaze narrowing. “You know, something else is missing here. Something I expected us to find a lot of.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Ghosts.” He kept one eye on the viewfinder screen as he spoke. “The asylum was crawling with them, right—those awful spirits that were trying to drag you off?” He pointed out the handprint on her arm as if she’d somehow forgotten about it. “Why aren’t there any of them here?”

She gave the matter some thought. “Maybe it’s because this house is different. The cult murdered people at the asylum; here, though, there may not have been any of that going on. This was where Sinistrari lived—”

Sadie had been prepared to continue when a sharp sound interrupted her and left her white in the face.

A jarring wail echoed through the house, gasping and hoarse.

It was that of an infant.

“What’s up?” he asked, noting the raw terror in her expression. It seemed he was unable to hear the shrill cries even then crowding the air, though the flickering of the handcam screen clued him in quickly. “There’s something here? Did I speak too soon?”

Sadie nodded. “Y-You don’t hear that?”

He paced into the dinette, handcam sweeping the dim scenery. “No, what is it?”

“It’s a b-baby,” she stammered. “It’s crying.”

The wailing increased in volume and was joined by a sharp scent in the air, a scent at once sweet and foul, which made her stomach churn and her mouth flood with saliva. It was like the smell of raw meat left to spoil in the sun. The fire bumbled on but she could no longer sense its woody notes for the cloying aroma of rot that presently hung in the air.

August appeared oblivious to this sensory cue as well, and started into the foyer. “Where do you think it’s coming from?”

The camera screen flickered a moment as he wandered back toward the stairwell.

“August, wait!” she called. “D-Don’t wander off without me!” Her senses were beleaguered, but even so she knew it unwise to separate and she started for the dinette herself in search of him. She had managed only a few paces, her gut roiling violently, when she was stopped in her tracks, however.

The mass of dead birds on the floor had begun to stir.

The turbid soup of feathers, flies and black, staring eyes quivered, and from within it there rapidly emerged a squirming, shadowy silhouette. It was in the shape of an infant, tiny limbs wheeling angrily. The carrion mound continued to convulse and its assortment of slender avian bones and raven feathers were enjoined into something vaguely anthropoid.

A skeletal hand made from the wings of a mourning dove and webbed in drooping flesh pawed at the writhing infant. With a beaked face filled with staring, dead eyes, the shambling, feathered thing began to peck at the wailing child and then to gulp it down into its sinewy gullet like a pelican. The nightmarish scene unfolded in the space of seconds, and when the child had been consumed and its screaming had ceased, the carrion creature turned its myriad dead eyes to her and called her by name in a low, cooing voice. “*Sadie... Sadie...Sadie...*”

Her legs gave out and she hit the floor with a loud *thud*. Seated now, she pushed herself backward as the feathered apparition rose and crept on all fours toward her. Bony hands clad in rotten meat slapped the timeworn boards, and the figure, speaking in a low feminine voice, seemed to watch her through the countless black eyes strewn about the its makeshift body. It called her name in sing-song fashion—playfully.

“*Sadie... Sadie... Sadie...*”

Petrified though she was, she knew it to be her mother’s voice. Beyond her first few days on Earth, she had never heard it, but as the foul golem called out to her, she noticed some cryptic quality in it—a note that set it apart from the voices of

other women. In the same way that a baby bird knows its mother's song, so too did Sadie sense a maternal familiarity in the creature's tone.

The mass staggered on, reaching out to her and spouting her name without pause. Sadie had been forced up against the hearth, and would either welcome the miserable thing into her arms or else crawl into the fire to escape it. She chose instead to launch herself to the right, her fingers picking up splinters in the floors, and made a mad dash for the dinette, only narrowly avoiding the rotten, misshapen hands.

Wild with fear, Sadie gained her feet and ran through the dark house, eager to build as much distance as possible. She burst through the foyer, then into the adjoining chamber, before passing into the kitchen and diving into the dark hovel that had once been Sinistrari's library. Hardly able to see, save for the meager shafts of light that entered from the breaks in the upper story, she sat on the floor and cowered against one of the shelves, knees tucked into her chest. "August! August!" she cried.

As she shuddered there, she noticed something odd about the little room—something she'd missed during her initial tour. There was an unnatural current of heat moseying through the otherwise lukewarm air, as if it were issuing from a vent or escaping through some fissure. Though she had no idea where this warm draft was coming from, she felt it wax and wane across her goose-pimpled flesh over the course of several moments.

Before she could deduce the source of this heat, she was distracted by plodding footfalls just outside the room. Someone was approaching. She lowered her head, tried to make herself as compact as possible, and wished she could disappear into some crack in the floors. From the dim kitchen, a long humanoid shadow spread across the walls as a figure turned the corner and entered the study.

Thankfully, it was August, the light of his handcam almost blinding her as he used it to scope out the room. "Hey, you all right?"

She loosed a long sigh, offering only a nod. She made no move to stand.

“What happened? I heard you go running, but...” He turned and plumbed the depths of the kitchen a moment as if expecting to find something there.

Knowing that he'd been unable to see or hear the apparition, she shook her head. She waited a few moments for the gruesome phantom to materialize, but it seemed to have lost interest. Quite possibly it had been a hallucination or some trick of the house; whatever the case, it didn't return. “Never mind. This house is messing with me.” Her skin picked up on the mysterious warmth once more. The temperature difference between this heat and the ambient air was great enough for her to take pause, and she held out her hands in search of more. “August, do you feel that?” she whispered.

From the doorway, he gave a shake of the head. “Feel what?”

Her clammy skin was graced by another puff of warmth. “It's warm over here. There's... there's warm air coming from somewhere...” She peered up at the stained ceiling, to the empty shelves, but could find no vents thereabouts; her gaze ran to the desk, to the floors, but still the source of the phantom warmth eluded her. “I mean it. It's warm over here.” She rose, took a few paces and grasped his arm, dragging him back to the shelf, all the while waiting for the putrid phantom to rear its head once again.

August held out a palm and sampled the air, slowly raising and lowering his arm with a knit brow. “Huh...” he muttered after several seconds. “Yeah, I see what you mean. There's a draft in here—the outside air seeping in. It's hardly surprising, what with all the damage to the walls.”

“No,” she countered, “this isn't fresh air.” She leaned down, sniffed a few times and held out her arms to track the direction of the current. “It doesn't smell fresh. It smells like something is burning.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it could be the fire. The fireplace is just beyond this wall, or close to it. I wouldn't be surprised if

you could smell it through the cracks in the walls.”

This explanation didn't satisfy her. “There's no way. The fireplace is on the other side of the first level, past the foyer. It's not exactly next-door to this room. This heat has to be coming from somewhere else.” She ran her fingers against the dust-covered shelves, teased their grooves and lines. “Could there be something behind this wall?”

He cracked a little smile. “What, like a secret door?” The grin faded forthwith. “No, of course not. This isn't a Saturday morning cartoon, Sadie.”

She didn't reply, but kept on inspecting the seams between the shelves. The warmth seemed to pour from a few particular spots where the ancient furniture met the wall, though her tugging at the wood yielded no movement. “I mean, there could be... Help me with this, knock on it or something, will you? I feel like there's something back here.”

August sighed and lowered his pack. He held the flashlight low and began knocking on panels with an arched brow. “This is a waste of time! What kind of—”

“Just help me look!” Sadie dropped to her knees and jostled the lower shelves. The wood was dense and matted with dust and spider's silk. Her pulling at the first few panels produced no effect, though her exploration of the bottom shelf, of its backing, resulted in unexpected movement to the rear. “Hold on, what is this?” she asked aloud, giving it a harder push. To her surprise, the panel began to shift.

The wood was slightly warm to the touch, almost as though another hand had been pressed to it just moments before. She soaked in the warmth and then gave the panel a shove.

With a grating creak, the panel swung open *inward*, and the whole of the fixture began to groan. The new opening emitted a pale orange flicker that danced upon the inky floors they presently stood upon, and more of the delicious warmth entered the room unobstructed.

“What in the world?” asked August, still incredulous. “Did you just break something, or was that supposed to happen?”

“I think... it really is a hidden entrance to another room...”

“Well,” he asked, “where does it lead?”

She hugged the floor and crawled till her head and shoulders were within the shelf to get a look inside, and what lay beyond rendered her at a loss for words.

She was staring into a narrow tunnel. Fitted with a descending staircase of worn stone and alight with flashes of orange and yellow emanating from deeper down, the passage was filled with a warm, pungent air. The steps just beyond the opening in the false shelf were dusty, evidently untrodden for some time, and yet an active fire could be felt down below, just around the bend.

She backed out of the shelving unit and peered up at August with wide eyes. “T-There’s a tunnel back there!” she whispered. “Stairs leading down into a basement or something. There’s light—firelight. That’s where the warmth was coming from.”

Incredulous, August knelt down and leaned till one of his ears was nearly pressed to the floors. He looked through the opening for some time before sneezing due to the dust. “All right, you win,” he said, sitting upright, legs crossed. “There’s a super secret doorway leading down to a cellar or furnace room. Question is... *why?*”

Sadie couldn’t say what existed beyond those stairs; she only sensed that this discovery was a significant one and wasted no time in nudging various of the other shelves in an attempt to enlarge the opening. “We’ll see what’s down there as soon as we get these other shelves out of the way. Help me out.” She pushed and pulled at various panels, sought other pressure points, but both she and August were unable to find any other mechanism in the wall of shelves that would allow them passage into the tunnel.

Frustrated, August pushed on the entire unit with the heel of his boot. The wood groaned, but short of hacking apart the whole thing, he could find no way to expand the opening. “So, what? This secret room can only be accessed by this tiny cubby?”

Returning to the floor, Sadie crawled back into the passage till she’d managed—with no little effort, to get her head and shoulders through. The fit was tight, but it was just possible for her to squirm through the narrow space if she put her arms in front of her and wiggled through on her belly. Gripping the lip of the nearest stair, she pulled herself through the rest of the way. “I made it!” she whispered, turning back and looking out at him from the opening. “There’s probably a way to open the entire shelf, but this place is old. It’s possible the mechanism doesn’t work anymore. Just try and crawl through like I did. It’s a tight fit, but just exhale as you hit the half-way point and you should make it.”

“I’d love to, but there’s no way I’m going to make it through.” He was on the floor, chin resting on a dusty board. “Let me just try and break this thing down, OK?”

“No!” she warned, glancing behind her into the fire-dappled darkness. “Just crawl through.”

With a sigh, August thrust the camera into the opening, spread out across the floor, and began a careful crawl through the passage. He held his arms out before him, undulated this way and that, but no matter how he shifted he couldn’t get his shoulders through. “Nope,” he said, backing out and batting cobwebs from his hair. “I don’t fit. Unless you can pop my shoulders back into place after I dislocate them, I’m not getting through there.”

“Try again!” she pleaded.

He shot her a stern look through the opening. “I’m telling you, I can’t! It’s too tight! I stand a better chance of getting stuck and suffocating than I do of wiggling in there.” He shuddered. “Just... here, take this.” August rifled through his bag and held out his flashlight.

“But what’ll *you* use to see?” she asked.



He lowered the handcam and blinded her with its light. “I’ll use ol’ reliable. You just hurry up and take a look around down there. If you find anything interesting, fill me in. I’m gonna hang out here and... keep watch, I guess. And if for whatever reason things get heavy down there, hurry on back, OK?” His eyes were hardened by concern. “If we’re being honest, I don’t think anything remotely good is waiting down there. Maybe you should just stay above-ground, no?”

The warm air licked her heels like the breath of some animal shrouded in the darkness below. *Excitement* wasn’t the right word; at that moment, Sadie was filled with a feeling of great expectation—a feeling that, finally, after having bumbled confusedly around the manor house, they’d finally struck upon something of importance. She didn’t *want* to go down there, but there was simply no way she could ignore these stairs and leave the depths unexplored. “I’ll hurry! I promise!” Sadie dared a little peek down the first couple stairs, brought the light around. “If something happens, I’ll come right back.”

August was obviously less keen on this course of action than she was, gritting his teeth and toying nervously with the handle of the camera, but he offered a firm nod and sat down quietly on the floor. “Like I said... I’ll be keeping watch. Just... be careful down there, OK?”

“I will.” With that, she stood to her full height, knocked the dust from her clothes and began descending, flashlight in hand. She stepped as lightly as she could so as to prevent echoes from issuing through the confined passage, and prior to each pace she made sure to study the stones, not wishing to trip on unseen obstacles. The stony steps were all clear, though, and she climbed down without incident.

The entire passage was made of stone, seemed as though it had been carved out of the bedrock. She paused in her descent to run her fingers across the slate-colored walls. The path went downhill by small degrees, wound down into the earth like a screw, until—twenty-odd steps later—she reached the end and found herself standing in a high-ceilinged chamber whose only flickering light issued from between the grates of an old furnace in the far left corner.

Warmth permeated the space thanks to the crackling blaze, but even so her body was assailed by shivers as she took in the whole of the room from the narrow entryway. The floors and walls were of the same stone that had brought her thence, though these latter were difficult to see, for massive wooden bookshelves ringed the room. What little wall space existed in between was home to framed pictures—and even from this distance Sadie could tell that their subjects were consistently odious.

Stationed across the room, staring out at her from within the hazy darkness, was a slapdash painting in a gilt frame. The painting was of a figure in the slumped, sinewy tradition of Goya's Saturn, and the body of a child featured as well—though the pale, limp thing had been divided neatly between the monstrous creature's sketchy fist and oozing mouth. The bent cannibal, nude and boasting a shock of grey hair, had been painted nearly to life-size, and had about it a horrible kinesis that suggested real movement—*life*. The whites of its wide eyes burned through the darkness in a kind of triumph, and the strokes of red that adorned its chin and bare chest possessed, even in this low lighting, a sheen not unlike freshly-spilt blood.

The next picture she found, a smaller thing hung in the crevasse between two heavily-burdened shelves, was not a painting, but a photograph—one she had seen before. The print hanging there was a group picture taken on the grounds of Rainier Asylum. It was the exact same photo she'd come across in her father's journal. The dusty frame had kept this one in better condition than the dogeared version in her possession, but the sitters and backdrop were all the same.

She was standing, it seemed, in a well-hidden library. Pulling her eyes away from the grotesque canvas, the ancient photograph, she studied the shelves that surrounded her and marveled at the countless cloth-bound volumes that cluttered each. The room above, where August was waiting, had merely been a decoy—*this*, then, had been Sinistrari's study, the true site of his hideous researches.

After a moment's pause she stepped further inside, and the beam of her flashlight illuminated the rocky ceiling, where small, wrought-iron chandeliers had been placed every few feet and the candles within them completely encased in gossamer thread over many years. Wall-mounted sconces turned up here and there, where lit candles or torches might have once been placed, lending the impression she'd just wandered into some medieval compound like those described in August's historical audiobooks.

The great center of the room was empty, save for threadbare carpets that had been spread across the floor. These reddish, stringy things had not moved in so long they appeared somehow fused to the stone. To the far right, between two bookcases, was a handsome wooden desk—behind it, a leather high back chair with carved armrests of stately design. But these features kept her attention for only a brief time, for the wax and wane of the furnace flame soon drew her eye.

She had, in her brief wanderings through the space, fancied herself quite alone, and except in the yet unplumbed shadows she failed to see where any lurker might be hiding. The existence of this fire, though, suggested a very recent occupancy in this room. Had her mother started this fire, and the one in the hearth upstairs, or had it been someone else—and *why* had they bothered on such a temperate day? Was the blaze a mere illusion? No—that couldn't be the case. As she paced toward the furnace, she felt the heat waft from the red-hot grate, picked up a whiff of smoke. The fire was real; she was sure enough of that.

Sadie had come within fifteen feet of the massive furnace when she spied something at rest to its left. From her position it was well-obscured, rendered solely by the caprice of the flames, but she ground to a halt, held out her flashlight and waited for her eyes to piece things together before continuing.

In the corner nearest the furnace, she discovered a rust-flecked wheelchair with a sagging leather backing.

And in it there slumped a body.

She reacted violently to the find, tumbling a few paces back and leaving the silent sitter bathed in darkness for a moment. When next she took aim with her light, she feared she'd find the figure on its feet, ready to pounce on her, though her second peek at the chair evidenced no movement. The chair was still filled, the figure still slumped.

She had found a corpse—and this one, it seemed, was rather old. The figure was bent forward, face resting against the stone wall, and all its skin had gone dry and brown, shrunken against the bones. This cadaver had been there a long time by the looks of it—many, many years. The wheelchair—the same one she'd seen upstairs, she was certain—was parked right beside the furnace, as though the figure had stopped there with the intention to stoke the fire. She watched the corpse for a few breathless moments, though, and not a white hair shifted on its desiccated head.

Where the normal, healthy reaction at such a find was terror or disgust, Sadie breathed quite the sigh of relief. *Looks like a run-of-the-mill corpse, and it's been here awhile. I don't think I have to worry about this one jumping out at me.* With caution in her step, she crept toward it and took a closer look. Bony fists remained wrapped around the wheelchair's armrests, and certain of its appendages—ears, fingers—had withered and flaked off over time. The corpse had likely been there for decades...

“Sinistrari,” she muttered.

This, then, was the body of the famed scholar, the individual who'd kickstarted the hellish cycle of events that had corrupted Rainier Asylum, brought her mother into the world and ultimately led to Sadie's own life and all its woes. The shrunken corpse had remained here in this hidden library, and as she scanned the darkness behind her, she couldn't help wondering if his spirit still walked these floors, still paged through these mouldering books and continued his forbidden research. The way she'd heard it, the man had been blind, deaf and immobile at the end—curiously afflicted around the time of the atrocity at Teramo. Even so, he'd seemingly spent his last days in this library, furthering his dark studies.

Having seen all she cared to see in that corner of the room, she started back toward the desk with the hopes of hastily exploring his materials. There was no chance of her getting through all of the books—there must have been hundreds of volumes crammed into the shelves—but there was a real possibility that one of them would shed light on the mystery of her mother’s existence—and on her true nature.

Sadie appraised the desk and began rifling through materials left sitting for decades in the dust. Handsome pens, blank stationary of exceptional quality and other things crowded the desktop; it was in the drawers, though, that she hit pay dirt. The uppermost drawer contained little more than dust and a few long-dead insects that had crawled in through the keyhole. The one underneath it featured something more alluring—a creased notebook filled with ink-stained pages.

She snatched the book up at once and flipped through it hungrily by the glow of the flashlight.

The script was messy, haphazard in places. Sinistrari’s celebrated books on folkloric and anthropological subjects had been published in English—and they had earned him acclaim in academic circles worldwide. Here, though, there was little of her mother tongue to be found. Instead, she encountered evidences of Latin in the thing—most conspicuously in the header of the first page.

The smeared ink scrawl on that first subject line was a single word: *Diabolus*.

Sadie didn’t know Latin, but her handle on etymology was sufficient to get the gist.

*Diabolical. Demonic. Demon.*

She flipped onward, encountering hand-drawn diagrams which, though messy, were incredibly detailed. Tight clusters of hasty script were attributed to certain lines and rings within multi-layered drawings; to her mind, their closest kin were those found in ancient alchemical texts. The designs themselves were composed of sharp angles and interwoven rings, though her learning in this area was nonexistent and she could scarcely guess at the relationships between the layers.

The notes, when parsed, dropped certain sinister hints, however.

“*Fresh donor body*” was the first appearance of English in the sequence, and this particular turn of phrase was suggestive of occult workings with which she’d had some firsthand experience. It called to mind the case of Watchful Tom, where a fresh corpse had been stolen by cultists and utilized as a vessel. Sadie turned the journal in her hands, her gaze tracing the lines in the inner-most ring, and reading aloud the Latin inscription at its center. “*Diabolus.*”

From the rich darkness to her back, there came a low, guttural chuckle.

She started, turned on her heels and jammed the flashlight into the shadow. She revealed no other presence save for that desiccated body still slumped in the wheelchair near the furnace, though at this distance her light scarcely reached the rusted wheels, and as the chuckle persisted she became certain it was the corpse who was laughing.

“*You understand now, yes?*” came a voice in the dark. It was deep and masculine, tinged with a faint European accent.

“S-Sinistrari?” she managed, not daring to move an inch.

The cadaver did not reply, except to offer another throaty laugh.

“W-What does all of this mean?” she asked, giving the notebook a shake. “What is *Diabolus*?”

Though the figure did not move, it was heard to loose a great sigh. “*It is a great, black tree—watered by blood, fed on struggle and ever-straining toward the heavens; and you are the fruit it has borne.*”

“My mother, then?” She took a slight step to her left, bringing her that much closer to the doorway. “What is she? A demon? A witch?” The light dipped and, for a moment, she failed to keep the figure in her sights. When she found him again, she saw he still hadn’t moved.

“*I called it down in Teramo,*” came Sinistrari’s haunting voice, “*and I gave myself up as a vessel to it. It robbed me of*

*sight so that I might see only what it wished; I was made deaf of every sound but its voice within me. What little life I had was dedicated solely to carrying out its will. I brought it with me overseas, settled here where none knew my name. And when I had attracted others to the cause, I set about gathering the necessary raw materials. As was written by the black hand of another age, the Diabolus would ripen for three months, three weeks and three days. On the moonlit night in which she entered into the world she lacked breath and pulse. To realize the fullness of her existence would require her to complete seven cycles of birth and feeding, with adequate preparation for each, and a mind toward certain cosmic phenomena. You were conceived during this rare phase—you are the seventh and final offering.”*

“So,” she began, oblivious to the mistiness of her eyes, “that’s it, then? That’s what my life boils down to? I’m just fuel to be burned by this nightmare you built? That’s all these past twenty-five years amount to?”

The shadow-bound cadaver seemed to click his tongue at this display of self-pity. “*No, not at all,*” he cooed. “*Yours is the highest calling; higher than mine, higher than any of the others. Your life is the match head that will set all the world ablaze.*” The ghoul chuckled. “*To be frank, miss, you weren’t intended to have even one year on this Earth—much less twenty-five!*”

She winced at the sound of his laugh and took a few more steps toward the entrance, eyes fixed on his hunched form. “You expect me to give myself up? To just walk into her arms, then?” She shook her head. “Sorry, but that isn’t what I came here for. I came to put an end to this mess you’ve made; to put off death a little longer, if possible.”

The cadaver offered a growling laugh. “*Certainly—the realization of the final cycle will not take place just yet. Some preparations must be made...*”

“Oh? Such as?” she challenged, her back to the narrow doorway now and one foot seeking the lowermost step.

*“You must reach new heights of anguish,”* came the slow reply. *“If you are to nourish the Diabolus, you must be robbed of happiness—of the things you hold dear. That fellow upstairs will fill the need nicely, I think.”*

Sadie’s face lost its color. She whipped around and peered into the dark passage that led back up to the ground level of the house and the secret entrance. “Y-You leave him out of this!” she demanded. Then, turning back toward the corpse, she grit her teeth and backed into the passage. “Leave him alone!”

The figure—wheelchair and all—was gone, however.

From the top of the cramped stairs there drifted Sinistrari’s low, gravelly laugh.

Out of her mind with panic, Sadie rushed up the steps, banging against the narrow walls as she went. “August!” she gasped out. “Run! Get away from there!” She clambered up to the top and then dove to the floor, attempting to climb through the small opening on her belly. “August, go!”

Something barred the way into the small room, however.

August was no longer in view, but the rusted wheels of Sinistrari’s chair, coupled with two crumbling feet, were visible just beyond the opposite end of the shelf. *“Now, behave yourself. Your mother’s almost home...”* he said with a croaking laugh.



He panned to his left, then to his right, the viewfinder filled with flickering dust motes. The sounds of Sadie's descent had faded out; she'd probably already reached the bottom. *I hope she's OK down there. What if something happens and I can't get to her?* He gnawed on his thumbnail and paced quietly in front of the bookshelf.

That was when he heard it—Sadie's voice.

It didn't come from the secret passage—at least, it didn't seem to. Bafflingly enough, it seemed to come from the *upper* level. He knelt upon the floor and stuck his head in the shelf opening to listen; when the calls of his name made a reprise some moments later, there remained no doubt that they were coming from above, rather than below.

*"August! August! Come quick!"* came the hurried cries.

*I just watched her wiggle through that opening like a minute ago. The stairs go downward... There's no way she could have gotten upstairs, right?* He pulled his head out of the opening, dusted off his hair and stood, peering through the doorway into the battered kitchen. *Then again, I don't know what's down there. Maybe there's another stairway below that leads upstairs? Or maybe...*

It didn't make sense. There was no way she could be upstairs, and yet he'd heard her voice coming from there. It emerged again, shrill—panicked. *"August, please! I need help!"*

He waffled at room's center, his gaze divided between the secret entrance and the kitchen. He ventured a few steps toward the latter, peeked up at the holes in the ceiling, and found shadows cast there, as of someone standing close-by the edge. "S-Sadie?" he chanced. "That really you?" *Is that really you, or is this place throwing me for a loop? The asylum played all kinds of tricks on her—is this house doing the same to me?*

"August!" she pleaded from upstairs, "I can't get out—the floor is thin and I don't want to fall through!"

Concerned though he was at this report, he couldn't help but remain skeptical. *You just watched her go down into the passage with your own eyes, though...* He wasn't sure which sense to trust. The only thing he was certain of was that his eyes and ears, both, might be looking to betray him in a place like this. He crept into the kitchen and, on tiptoe, tried looking into one of the many openings in the ceiling. Through one small patch where the plaster and sub-flooring had given way, he spied a shadow—pale-faced, standing near a window—and heard his name called yet again.

"Sadie, is that you?" he asked the figure, his voice cracking.

"Yes! Please, hurry! I'm afraid the floor will give!"

*If you don't go and she really did find her way upstairs, you're going to feel like a real monster when she falls through the floor and snaps her neck. On the other hand...* He looked back to the shelf, to the secret entrance. *I've been shouting all this time and haven't heard a peep from down there... Maybe she did get upstairs by some other, secret staircase. I mean, in a weird old house like this, it's possible, right?*

"August!"

All the while, the screen on the handicap had remained clear. The abundant dust had wreaked havoc on the display, but it hadn't done anything out of the ordinary—no scrambling, no fading in and out, as it was wont to do when faced with psychical interruptions.

*The camera would be freaking out if this were a ghost calling out to me, right? The screen goes haywire whenever there's something supernatural afoot; that's what happened at Beacon Hill. The asylum, too.* Noting the display's continued calm, he made his decision. "I'm coming," he announced, starting back through the kitchen, rounding the corner and starting up the tight corridor that led to the sagging wooden stairs.

The ramshackle stairs proved an intractable problem, however.

"This is a deathtrap," he muttered to himself as he eyed the bannister.

A tenuous rapping of the first couple steps with his heel found them to be stable enough, if not a bit crooked, and his ascent, minutes in the making, was accomplished in a fit of starts and stops. When he'd made it to the top and avoided the small pocks in the floor that threatened to gobble up one of his boots, he placed a hand to the grimy walls and began ambling down a dark hall whose flooring was more than a little spotty. He took the path to his left, aiming to find the room directly over the kitchen, from which Sadie's voice had seemed to come. *One step at a time. Don't run, just focus on moving nice and slow. If the boards bend too much, find another that'll bear your weight...*

August's measured steps saw him walk past various chambers—mostly bedrooms—whose windows looked out upon the dense woods. Unlike the blocked windows of the second story, these remained open. *Well, I guess if we can't find another way out of here, we'll just jump from one of these and hope for the best. It works well enough in the movies, right?*

The floor sagged beneath his stride, no matter how measured his steps, but after a few minutes he'd made it nearly to the end, and found a large bedroom with a particularly worm-eaten floor. The apertures looked down upon the kitchen he had only moments ago occupied, and he loosed a great sigh at having finally reached his destination. "OK," he said aloud, "Your knight in shining armor finally made it. Now, why don't

you start by telling me how you got up here to begin with, huh? Because wandering up here is just about the dumbest thing I—”

He paced carefully into the room, camera in hand, but stopped just inside the entrance when the display broke into a fury of visual snow.

He lowered the handcam and looked to the window.

Outside, the woods were roiling—and not with rain, nor wind. The very limbs of the trees seemed to be shuddering and a hazy darkness was settling over them from a distance, barreling in like a fog. It gave the impression that something was coming through those woods and bringing a noxious black mist in its wake. This unnatural haze was dense enough to blot out the daylight that peeked through the gaps in the trees.

*Something is coming.*

Stifling a shudder, he turned from the window. “Sadie, something is coming toward this house, from the woods, and I think I know what...”

But Sadie wasn’t there.

Instead, he blinked dumbly at a twitching stranger seated in the far corner.

“**W**ho’re *you?*” asked August in a whisper.

The figure in the leaning wooden chair startled and drew in a ragged gasp but otherwise gave no audible reply. And what a pitiable thing this figure was—an emaciated thing, one arm wrapped tightly around his torso and one hand clutched to a bone-white face. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, but both had been soiled with grime and the bulk of his whitish hair littered the floor leaving a raw, flaking scalp bared to the stuffy air. The shuddering mass of withered parts was corpse-like, but possessed sufficient movement in its fits of twitching and seeming terror to convey at least trivial proofs of life.

August couldn’t help but tremble at the threshold, disgusted by this tortured specimen in the chair. He’d seen photos of prisoners of war who’d appeared more robust than this gnarled heap of bones. “Who are you?” he asked again. “What happened to you?”

“*August! Please hurry!*” It was a terrible thing to watch this ghoulish creature speak in Sadie’s voice. The imitative call hung sickly in the air and seemed to have no association to the figure quaking in the seat—why, before he finally dismissed the notion as insane, the voice had almost seemed to issue from somewhere else in the room, rather than from that hidden mouth. The man continued clutching at his face as though the merest sampling of the light might render him blind. How long had he sat like this prior to August’s arrival—how many days and nights had seen him bunched up in this

spartan tomb? How many days of hunger and thirst had been necessary to reduce him to this miserable state?

“H-How’re you doing that?” August took another step inside, minding the threadbare floors. “Why are you speaking in her voice? What do you want?”

The vein-riddled hand held tightly against the man’s visible ribcage gave a little shake, a spastic summons. “*I want you to come here,*” he said in a different voice—a voice that might actually have been his own.

August didn’t accept the invitation outright, instead keeping a safe distance. He held out his hands. “Listen, buddy, I don’t know who you are, but why don’t we get you some help? You just... stay put... I’ll get out of here, and when I do I’ll have an ambulance come by and—”

“*No,*” spat the thing in the chair, “*It’s too late for that...*”

“What happened?” asked August, adopting a more understanding tone. “You look like you’ve had a rough go of it. You could use a doctor...”

The figure convulsed for some moments, then grew eerily still, neck craned forward and fingertips digging into the corners of his hidden face. “*Have you seen what happens to the birds?*”

Recalling the confusing, violent behaviors of the birds they’d witnessed upon entering the house, August nodded.

“*She visits me at night. She walks these halls when the sun goes down, and I hear her voice in my head. She put us here to watch over things... But she’ll be returning soon. I know you want to leave. So do I... But we can’t. Have you seen what happens to the birds?*” The grim figure loosed a shrill giggle that set his flimsy body rattling. “*She knew you would come, and she was right. She told me all about it.*”

“*Who?*” asked August, feigning ignorance. “Who did this to you?”

“*The pale woman...*”

“A pale woman, huh? What’s her name? What’s she look like?” Though he panned the room, he found little of interest. There was a closet to his right, the warped wooden door sitting slightly ajar, but otherwise the room offered nothing. He swung the handcam around in a wide arc, testing his surroundings. The screen flickered off and on, in seeming anticipation of some greater stimulus, but was mostly steady.

“*I don’t know her name.*”

“I see...” He sized up the figure, wondered how he’d manage to get him out of the house. Hiking up to this room had made for a perilous journey. Returning downstairs with this man in tow—*without* falling through the floor—seemed nigh impossible. “What’s your name?”

“*Dan,*” came the tired reply. “*My name was Dan.*” It was a curious thing, the way he referred to his name in the past tense.

Affecting coolness, August eased his way toward the closet door and took a casual look around. Extending a hand slowly so as not to excite the feeble character, he toyed with its brittle knob. “So, Dan, how long have you been here?” he continued, though the long silence that followed seemed to highlight the poor creature’s utter ignorance of time. With great care, he wrapped a hand around the door handle and began drawing the closet open—though when he did, he was met with a sight that left him stunned.

Bunched in one corner of the narrow closet, bound in yellowed gauze, was the thing they’d seen upon entering the house—the ghastly figure who’d attacked them. Straw-like coils of golden hair covered the bulk of the weathered face beneath the veil, but one black eye remained visible, and it stared intensely at the ceiling. The figure was still as a corpse, but now and then its lips would quiver and its beady eye would shift by degrees. August stepped back, heart pounding, leaving the door ajar.

Dan sighed loudly. “*She has something in store for you. Yes... You’ll be useful to her, just as we were. I’m sure of it.*”

“Yeah, I’ll bet...” replied August, keeping an eye on the clothbound figure. “Is this, uh... this a friend of yours?” He motioned to the closet. “She looks like she could use some help, too.”

Suddenly, the body in the closet began to writhe. He heard it *thump* into the wall, heard the sack-like material as it rustled against the floor. The woman keeled over, black eyes straining and lips trembling. She looked like a fish out of water, and began inching very slowly out of the closet, leaving a thin trail behind her in the dust.

August stumbled backward, fell hard upon the floor and feared he might crash through. The boards managed his weight however, and he crawled hastily toward the hallway on hands and feet, the floors squeaking and groaning as he went. He made it as far as the threshold before turning back to Dan, white-faced and panting.

The figure in the chair was staring at him. Dan’s veiny hand remained pressed to his face, but the fingers were splayed now, providing a view of two washed out eyes and a black, toothless mouth. His torn lips parted and from behind them there issued a wild, hacking laugh. “*Fly! Fly, why don’t you?*” sounded the fragile voice, tinged with something like jubilation. He outstretched his skeletal arms, flapping them wildly as though he were a bird.

Laughter followed as he gained his feet and sprinted out of the room, but as August set across the trembling floors and burst into the hallway he found he was not alone there. A long shadow met him mere steps from the threshold of the crumbling room—a shadow he could trace back to the clothbound figure standing sentry at the top of the stairs. He peered back into the room, incredulous, and took a step back in retreat. “How did *you* get out here? You were just...”

The terrible thing leaned to one side, its beady black gaze boring through the veil of gauze and sinking into him like a dagger.

His heart sprang around in his chest as the figure took a shambling step toward him. “Whoa, there,” he muttered,



retreating a few paces down the hall. “J-Just stop right there.” He raised the camera, pointed it at the advancing thing in the hope that the light might force it back, but instead succeeded only in highlighting more of its hideous character than previously.

It was definitely a woman beneath the veil of off-white fabric, but a woman of remarkably thin cast and with unwholesomely sunken features. Blonde hair—coarse and tangled—was evident beneath the garb, which might have suggested a certain youthfulness if not for the unutterable withering of every other attribute. Skin, once fair, had been reduced to a wrinkled brown parchment that hung very closely to the bones. The eyes, which appeared pitch black, seemed to jumble around in their sockets with every unsteady step. Feet strewn with bluish-black veins plodded hard against the floors, and the gauze-bound mass was set aflutter by the flapping of unseen wings. The ghoulish automaton struggled on, one cadaverous hand outstretched toward him.

*Is there another way downstairs? Should I try getting out through one of the windows up here, or will the fall be too much?* The whooping laughter issuing from the other room was suddenly joined by another sound, which rang out as August turned and prepared to flee down the other end of the hall.

It was the sound of splitting wood.

Three footfalls into his flight, one of the floorboards had splintered beneath the sole of his boot, and without notice, the mouldering material surrounding it also gave way. With a terrible groan, the floor on which he stood disintegrated, and he fell through it in a shower of dust and splinters. He had time enough to gasp at losing his footing.

And then there was black.

She felt like a captive.

With Sinistrari waiting outside and August seeming to have vanished, she had no choice but to wander back down the passage and return to the hidden library. Starting out once again across the dark chamber, she eyed the enormous collection of books, their gilt spines shimmering in the low firelight, and tried to arrange her thoughts.

*What should you do? Sinistrari is just outside the opening—you can't get past him. And where's August? Its not like him to just wander off! Maybe I could look through these books—find something interesting in here. But that's going to take a long time... There are way too many, and there's no telling whether I'll be able to understand anything in them.*

As frustrated as she was terrified, she set out across the room and sized up the nearest shelf, running her fingers along the rows of books and trying to figure out which would prove most valuable to her. There were volumes with cryptic foreign titles whose contents she could never hope to parse; *Conversaciones con el Diablo* would push her childish understanding of Spanish beyond its limits. There was no telling what language the dense *Le Carte de Umbra Lungi* was written in, and the shelf beneath was crowded with works in what appeared to be Greek.

The other shelves, too, offered little of use to her—books in Latin, French and Italian were abundant but indecipherable. Though she flipped through their pages, eyed their illustrations

and fought to translate their dense text, she came away with nothing but confusion. It was fast becoming clear that this library was of use only to a learned individual, some multilingual polymath like Sinistrari. Sadie, well-educated and a lover of books, had never felt quite so inadequate as this, and she felt doubly ashamed at ever having thought that this mission of hers, to dive into Sinistrari's material, might yield answers to her most pressing questions.

*Maybe it's for the best, she thought, recalling Halloran's warning. I should have listened to him and never come here in the first place. If I could read these books, then maybe I'd learn things I'm not supposed to know—things that would only corrupt my mind. But still... what if the answer is in here? What if one of these books holds the key?*

The books in this library might very well have spelt out the means by which her mother had been brought into the world, as well as the means by which she might be removed from it, but all of that knowledge was completely out of reach, rendered in languages she couldn't speak a lick of. It was a cruel twist of fate, though from the other side there was something darkly humorous in it, too. She could almost hear Sinistrari's mocking tone as she tossed another of the mysterious tomes to the floor in a rage. *"So close... and yet so far away!"*

"If only Halloran were here," she muttered, walking up and down the line of shelves in search of books with English titles. "Maybe he would have been able to make sense of this stuff." She paused, then allowed herself a grim smile. "But then again, Halloran was smart enough to stay away from here. He wasn't a complete idiot like *you*."

Several minutes passed and she happened on some readable fare. The few books written in English—for she was able to pick out some ten or twelve in the low lighting—offered macabre illustrations and dark myths aplenty, but brought her no closer to solving the riddle of her mother's existence. She paged through them impatiently, but was only disgusted at the decadent contents.

One ratty book, an apparent translation of old Greco-Roman myths, featured heavily-underlined portions regarding cross-generational cannibalism in certain debauched sects. Another, a historical piece in weathered hardcover and written by none other than Sinistrari himself, contained chapters on mystery cults, and seemed to hint at blood rituals performed by degenerate Pagans in the days before the fall of Rome. Another of Sinistrari's books had turned up in her search—this one a mere collection of ancient myths and legends unearthed over years of anthropological research. There was a book by an Englishman named Harlowe on the subject of hyperdiffusionism—a subject, she was able to glean through several moments of skimming the introduction, that dealt with the origins of culture and technology. Proponents of hyperdiffusionism—a school of which Sinistrari was headmaster—claimed that civilization and technology as we know them emerged within a single ancient culture, and that they had spread across the world from this common progenitor. The book seemed valuable in that it provided an insight into Sinistrari's earlier academic work, but under the circumstances was quite useless.

The library was a dead-end. *It's pointless. There's nothing here that can help us. I should have listened. I should have stayed away...* Fed up, she crept to the stairs, made her way up the dark passage, and looked through the opening in the shelf.

To her surprise and delight, Sinistrari was no longer blocking the way! The specter had vanished at some point in the last few minutes, leaving the opening clear.

No sooner did she notice his absence was her attention drawn elsewhere, however.

She heard a terrible crash—sudden and raucous—and a detestable silence grew up in its wake. *Is the house falling apart? What in the world was that?* She waited, hoping to find out what the racket had been.

The silence was unyielding, however.

Sadie pressed herself to the cold stone floor and peered through the narrow opening at the bottom of the shelf. With

the wheelchair-bound specter gone, she wasted no time in squeezing herself through. When she'd crawled back out to the small, dark room beside the kitchen, she gained her feet, the flashlight locked within her trembling fist.

She didn't have to look far for the cause of the sound; the ceiling in the kitchen had collapsed, leaving a massive heap of debris that threatened to bar the way and trap her where she stood. Careful to avoid the jagged splinters, the exposed nails, she climbed over the mound of broken material at its shortest point and called out in her loudest voice. "August! Where are you?" Her heart began to race as she spied a bright light amidst the rubble—the bluish light of the handicam's display. "A-August?" she cried, unearthing the device.

There was a stirring in the corner, as of someone moving furtively toward her.

"*Shh...*" August pressed a dust-caked finger to his lips. "*Be quiet.*" His face was white as bone except where it had been scraped by debris, and he walked with a noticeable limp. "They're close-by... and they're listening," he panted.

"W-What happened?" she asked. "Who's listening?"

"Upstairs I met another one," he muttered cryptically. "Your mother left them here to keep an eye on the house while she was gone, because she knew you'd come looking for her." He drew a shaky breath, dust streaming from his hair. "This house is nothing but a trap and we walked straight into it. And... she's on her way."

Sadie stared at him in disbelief. "She's coming?"

He nodded. "Outside... the woods are darkening. Something's coming this way..."

She stood still, brow furrowed, and tried to process this. "Are you all right?" she finally asked. "Did you get hurt? I heard the crash."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about me. We need to get out of here, though. There isn't much time."

"But how?" she asked. "The door was shut—the window, too, remember?"

His expression hardened. “By any means necessary. What did you find downstairs?”

“Sinistrari’s library—the real one.” She pointed back into the room, at the opening in the shelf. “There are loads of books down there, but it would take me years to read them all—not to mention years of lessons in about a hundred different languages. I hate to say it, but the collection is mostly useless to us. I found a couple of books in English, but aside from those it’s all undecipherable.”

“The light—where was it coming from?” he pressed.

“There was a furnace down there... a small fire.”

He nodded slowly, seemed to be working over something in his head. “OK,” he said, motioning to the shelf. “Go back down there, set the place on fire. If we can’t just walk out the door, we’ll bring the whole house down.”

“Wait, what?” She chuckled wryly. “You just want to... set the house on fire? While we’re both inside?”

He arched a brow. “*Yeah.*”

“I mean...” She hesitated, but at the same time could offer no solution of her own to their imprisonment. “We could come back, find someone who could read those books,” she said.

“How long do you think it’ll take someone to read a few hundred books, Sadie?” he asked. “You think we have that long? And you think we’re going to get another chance like this? You think we’re just going to walk out of here and mosey on back for some research when it suits us? If we don’t get out of this house—and *fast*—we’re finished. Something is coming through the woods now, something *dark*. We don’t have days to come back to this, we don’t have hours to discuss some other plan of escape. We have minutes, if we’re lucky.” He pointed to the shelf. “Go down there and light the fire. It’s probably better that all of that dark stuff gets destroyed. That way, no one will ever be able to get their hands on it again. I’ll stay here and make sure no one follows you. But we need to hurry.”

“But... but what sense is there in burning the place down while we’re still in it? We may just die in the process. And are you *sure* we should just destroy the books? I know we shouldn’t read them, but what if the answer is in there somewhere?”

“I’m telling you, the books are pointless! Your old shrink was right; nothing good will come from filling our heads with that stuff. Your mother’s out there now, on the prowl. What good will all of that occult garbage do us? You want to try and summon another demon to duke it out with her? That’s not gonna fly! The time for reading is over.” He looked about the room, adding, “It’s a long shot, but if we light this shack up maybe the spell over it will be broken and we’ll be able to walk out before it burns to the ground. Either that, or the walls will start falling and we’ll be able to run for it. Doesn’t matter—doing something, anything—is better than waiting for your mother to arrive!”

She was crestfallen. The heaps of research contained in the library were her only hope for answers—as well as her only hope of escape. “I guess... we don’t have much of a choice, do we?” Defeated, she left the kitchen, adding, “Who were they? The ones you saw upstairs?”

“They were trapped here, just like us, and your mother put them to use. They managed to lure me away with their tricks. Somehow, they’re still alive—though your mother’s done horrible things to them.” He swallowed hard, taking the handicam from her and hunkering down. “She’s going to do the same to us unless we can somehow fly the coop. Hurry, Sadie.”

She dropped to the floor, easing her way back into the dim passage. “I’ll be right back. Please, be careful, OK? Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t,” he promised, studying the handicam’s dusty display wistfully. He wiped at his scraped brow and loosed a long sigh. “I’ll be right here.”

She was back inside the passage. Arriving at the top of the stone staircase, she hurried down on stilted legs, bursting back

into the dim library and zeroing in at once on the lit furnace whose payload bumbled around weakly in its iron housing. Without delay, she rushed across the room and studied the thing, looking for a way to open the hot grate without singeing her fingers. To the right of the unit was a rack of cobwebbed tools, and selecting a poker from among them she succeeded in prying off the front cover.

Within the thing were a number of burning logs, each of them whittled nearly to cinders. Sadie availed herself of the iron tongs in the instrument holder and set about trying to secure one. At that moment, a voice broke the silence and she dropped the tool altogether.

*“Do you know why the hearths in this house are always lit?”*

She turned with wide eyes and found the slouching corpse of Sinistrari, seated in his wheelchair upon the rug at room’s center.

*“When she came into this world, she had neither breath nor pulse. She cannot generate warmth, either. She often sits before the fire, basking like a snake in the sun—only then does her flesh possess the warmth of the living.”* The corpse did not stir, but issued a solemn warning. *“You will die in this house—die in the flames, if you attempt to burn it. Even if you could leave this house, it would not end. She will come for you. I advise you to surrender, to make peace with your fate. It is a beautiful thing to fulfill one’s purpose in life, no? You were made for greatness—to help the Diabolus realize its potential.”*

She hastily recovered the tongs and held them low. “I’m not just a cog in your machine...” she replied. “Even if it means running for the rest of my life, I refuse to give in.” She turned and plucked out one of the burning logs with the tool. “Others have failed, but I’m going to hack down this tree and sever all its roots.” With a grunt, she eased her grip on the tongs and launched the lit wood onto the floor, where it rolled several feet and met the edge of the threadbare rug. The punished red material caught at once, and within moments the entire thing had begun to burn.



From within the growing flames, Sinistrari's corpse loosed a dark chuckle. "*As you wish...*"

Smoke filled the air and began spreading across the ceiling. Removing another log from the furnace, she carried it toward one of the bookshelves and placed it atop a heap of old books, which readily caught fire. As the old paper was eaten away, the furniture began to alight and the room was brought into flickering relief.

The specter of Sinistrari, she discovered on her next trip to the furnace, had vanished.

Sadie tossed another log across the room and then started back for the stairs. Before she left, she plucked a pair of old books from one of the unlit shelves and touched them to the blazing rug. These she brought with her through the winding stone passage and tossed through the opening in the bottom of the shelf—only narrowly missing August's leg.

He jumped up at once. "You know, a little warning would have been nice!" The books skipped across the dusty floors with a shower of cinders before settling in one corner and spreading their flame to the nearby shelves.

She squeezed through the opening and then crawled across the floor. "I lit the bookshelves on fire, the rug..."

"Awesome. Now the question is... how much of this place will have to burn before we can find a way out?" He watched the flames climb up the shelves of the dark little room and backed toward the kitchen. "Maybe we should, you know, hang out over here. When the walls start to crumble we may be able to find a way through."

Followed by waves of black smoke and moving carefully over the pile of rubble in the kitchen, they made their way back toward the foyer, hopeful that the assault on the house would loosen its grip on the exits. From the very first the abode had acted as a living thing—perhaps, under the stress of a raging fire, it would conserve its sinister energies and its seal on the front door would fade.

They had come as far as the dark corner room that joined the foyer and kitchen when their progress came to a sudden halt, for the door remained preternaturally shut and someone—or, perhaps more appropriately, some *thing*—stood sentry just before it.

White gauze clung to a weathered face, and through it were visible two black eyes home to a penetrating stare. Beneath the veil, sprouting from a raw, peeling scalp, were clumps of disheveled blonde hair, and the cloth trembled here and there as if stirred by the flapping of unseen wings. Without warning, its puckered mouth sprang open and it ran across the tired floors toward them, the discordant cries of myriad birds breaking open the tense silence and rapidly swelling to a deafening crescendo.

The floorboards sang out beneath the monstrosity's stump-like feet, and as it struck out at Sadie with outstretched arms, she felt hot, sour—and *living*—breath pour from its maw across her face. With a wild grab, the thing had managed to lock one of its desiccated hands around Sadie's throat, and despite August's forceful intervention, the assailant held on, intent on squeezing the life out of her. However brittle the dead hands appeared, they possessed incredible power.

Sadie felt herself go slack with fear as her airway was crushed in the figure's grip. She kicked her feet, tried to shove the gauze-covered thing away, all for naught. Eyes shut, she waited for awareness of the physical world to leave her—to be transported into that dark, hallucinatory sphere she had twice accessed at the touch of the beckoning dead. She'd been caught; the squawking thing would drag her to her mother, and she would soon be consumed in that hellish nightmare world where the cries of the suffering never ceased and the fires always burned.

August took a hard swing at the figure, clocked it in the head, though when his fist connected with the thing it took the blow without flinching. He attempted to strike it again, this time with the flashlight, but was thrown to the floor with a savage swipe from the thing's free arm.

She spasmed hard against the figure's iron grasp, sure that she was now being transported to the world of the dead, but when next she opened her eyes she was still faced by the peeling countenance behind the gauze, still subject to its black, incisive gaze. Her lungs began to burn in search of air and her throat ached for the immense pressure, but she was still inside Winslow Manor—very much in the real world.

The hand locked around her throat was foul and skeletal, but it was living flesh.

This thing—this *woman*—wasn't a spirit, but a tortured human being under the sway of the house. Whatever humanity there had been in the figure had gone, along with its youth and beauty, but through the cracked palm on her windpipe Sadie could still sense the odd thump of a toiling heart.

It was sheer instinct that drove her to bury her thumb into one of the figure's eyes. Without hesitation, Sadie plunged her digit into the sunken, gauze-covered socket, hopeful that it would disarm the figure and allow her to escape.

But it didn't budge. Heedless of pain, of potential blindness, the thing continued to squeeze—with both hands now—and to her horror the injured eye still stared, utterly unaffected. This creature was possessed by hate, driven to action by the house's diabolism, and until its function had been fulfilled it would toil on forever, just as Watchful Tom and the beckoning dead had done for so many years.

Her lungs shriveled and her face flushed as suffocation slowly stole over her. Aside from the screeching of birds that still rang out like a siren, her ears were filled with the bombast of her panicking heart. It bounced frantically off her sternum as if in protest, and as Sadie struggled against the figure's iron grasp, she found the edges of her vision beginning to blur.

From behind the gauze-bound woman there crept another shape, a withered, lowly thing that crawled across the floors like an animal and stared up at her, toothless mouth agape. In overall shape, it was a thin and tormented man, but in practice it was something far more degenerate—the animate result of a human life degraded over time by the ancient sorceries at play

throughout the house. It studied her with dark eyes and offered a brief, cruel smile. The squawking died out suddenly, and in the new silence the figure began to speak—though it did so in a voice that was patently not its own.

*“How you’ve grown,”* said the punished thing loitering at her ankles, its warped hands trembling against the floor. The voice, feminine and melodious, had about it an edge of unexpected familiarity—a note which violently roused some primal memory in Sadie’s oxygen-starved brain. *“I’m coming to meet you, Sadie. After all these years, you and I will be together again.”* The ghoulish thing donned a knowing smile and nodded slowly.

She wanted to lash out at the monstrosity that spoke in her mother’s voice, attempted to kick it, but already she was losing control over her body. The hands around her throat did not slacken and she felt her senses fleeing one by one so that her leg merely flailed in the air and she nearly lost her balance. She tried once more to break free, to claw at the veiled face, but her attempt proved futile—she had no strength left.

*August... Where are you? If I don’t make it out of here... I hope that you’ll be OK...* She’d lost sight of her companion completely after he’d been knocked to the floor by her assailant, and though she waited for him to return, waited for him to stage a heroic rescue, she had about as much hope left for an escape as she had air in her shrinking lungs.

Whether the haziness in her surroundings was real or merely an artifact of her puttering vision was uncertain, but as she approached unconsciousness, the air seemed to grow thick with smoke. She blinked, found that the smoke was real enough to sting her eyes, and saw now that great, black waves of it were rolling in from the direction of the kitchen.

And then, from behind the ghoul, there was a flash of light.

Sadie watched blearily as the door swung open, admitting the glow of the midday sun. Everything in the smoky foyer grew suddenly still and silent as the light edged its way in, and she felt the hands on her neck loosen. No longer held in the

figure's vice grip, she fell straight to the floor, drawing in hacking gasps of pungent, hazy air.

Neither the gauze-clad figure nor the foul mimic on the floor moved to restrain her—in fact, as the light intruded upon the space and the fire spread through the kitchen, lighting it up like the inside of a jack-o'-lantern, they appeared stunned into immobility. When she'd managed to refill her lungs and regain her bearings, Sadie looked at each of them and found the same shocked expression on both of their weathered faces. They wore the look of one who'd just awakened from a night terror—a look of utter bewilderment and alarm.

The woman in gauze was the first to speak, and her voice was very low and tremulous. “W-What’s happening?” She twitched, placed a hand to her veiled face and began to peer about the room through one squinting eye. Unsteadily, she looked to her feet, where the other figure mirrored her terrified expression, and uttered, “D-Dan? Is that... you?”

His tattered lips trembling, Dan eased himself up onto his knees and nodded spasmodically. He raised a shaky finger and pointed to the door. Though he sought to speak, he managed only a fit of gasps. With a feeble tug on the garment she wore, he began scooting across the floor, his entire body heaving at the effort.

The room was so filled with smoke now that it was becoming difficult to see. Possessed of her wits, Sadie began a slow crawl toward the exit, where she was reunited with August some few feet away. “August!” she blurted, reaching out to him. “Are you all right?”

He nodded gravely, reaching out to her and helping her gain her feet. “Come on, let’s hurry.” With his camera in one hand, he limped with her to the exit.

The others, too, made feeble progress toward the door, though quickly fell behind for the incredible strain of motion on their weathered bodies. Where minutes before the pair had been at once fed upon and sustained by the house's diabolism, they were now left with withered limbs and critical injuries.

“August, hold on.” Sadie motioned back to the others whose slow movement had taxed them to the point of collapse. “We should help them.”

Here, though, August gave an uncharacteristically sharp reply. “*No*. They can’t be helped. Hurry up! We need to get out of here as fast as we can. There’s nothing we can do for them.”

She was struck by his lack of concern for the weakened victims, but yielded to his strong pull on her arm. Together they hobbled out of the house, finding themselves once again in the heavily-wooded cluster of hills, with great plumes of smoke pouring out of the doorway to their back. Dizzied and coughing, they wasted little time in descending the front steps and starting from the edge of the property.

As they went, eyes scanning the treeline in anticipation of the sinister presence they knew to be treading those same woods, she was burdened once more with guilt and turned back to the house. “August, we can’t just leave them there! They need our help! I think we—”

The words crawled back up her throat as she fixed the house’s smoky facade in her gaze. Smoke poured from every crevice, rising high into the overcast sky, and the front doorway was filled with the silhouettes of the two cowering figures they’d cruelly abandoned in their haste. The two of them had made it as far as the threshold, but as she watched, neither of them managed another inch of movement. Rather, they stood in place as if cemented, dark eyes wide with panic and feeble cries fleeing their lips. “L-Let us out!” crowed the woman, tearing at her gauze-covered face. “Please, let us out!”

“Why don’t... why don’t they just come outside?” asked Sadie, absently taking a step in the direction of the house.

Once again, August’s firm grip on her arm drew her back.

It was as if the doorway itself had been blocked by some unseeable barrier, glassed off. Smoke spewed out from all around them into the open, but the withered duo, despite standing mere inches from the exit, could not pass through it themselves. They wailed and pleaded from the open doorway but remained imprisoned.

“They can’t leave,” said August, turning away from the burning abode. “The fire seems to have hurt the house—it lost its grip for a minute there so we were able to exit, but those two... your mother and Sinistrari did something to them. They know where the door is, but they’re just like the birds—trapped.”

The cries of the doomed occupants rose sharply in the air as their torment reached a new crescendo. Thrashing as though in immense pain, the pair writhed in the smoke-crammed foyer and loosed a series of hoarse screams that filled the woods with anguish. At first glance they appeared to be suffering great pains, perhaps due to the encroaching fire, but the longer Sadie watched in horror, the more certain she became that the pitiable figures were reacting to another stimulus—to something that drew nearer the house every moment.

To her wandering eye, the woods to the back of the house seemed dressed in a deeper palette of greens and browns than the rest, the discrepancy almost fooling one into believing that the sun was very rapidly setting on one half of the accursed property. This was clearly not the case, however, for the sun was still high in the hazy sky. Nor could this rapid darkening be blamed upon the fire—the billowing smoke would surely obscure the woods given time, but no volume of smoke could lend more darkness to the shadows between the trees, nor saturate their twitching boughs with such dripping menace.

And it was then that she saw—and heard—a thing that would linger on in her memory the rest of her days. The hoarse wails of the house’s suffering tenants were joined by a legion. It was as if every tree in the woods had been subjected to equal torment and given a mouth to scream with, and the air grew thicker with tortured cries than it did with smoke. The miserable pair still writhing in the doorway grew rigid and momentarily silent before erupting suddenly into pillars of white-hot flame. Sadie watched as the cadaverous duo were swiftly immolated—loosing infernal screams and flopping against the floors one moment, reduced to a pile of churning cinders the next. Their deaths had been incredibly swift; had she not heard their terrible cries with her own ears, she

might've believed them to have gone from the world without much suffering.

The mournful swell of the woods continued, however—every blade of grass seemed to raise its voice in anguish and the stain that had been plaguing the woods behind the house began to spread, coloring still more of the area in preternatural shadow. It was in that shadow, a calm point amidst the chaos that surrounded her, that Sadie saw it—

*Saw her.*

Deep in the woods, visible in a gap where the trees were thin, and standing out on account of her paleness and flowing, ivory garb, was a woman. She stepped very slowly and advanced with a smile, raven-colored hair framing both sides of her delicate face. Hardy branches sagged and wilted in her wake, shedding their needles in sickly eruptions. With the sight of her came a new smell that competed with the intense smoke—a smell of decaying flesh. The present scene jostled Sadie's senses so violently she believed herself to have stepped out of the real world completely and to have entered a living nightmare. This hidden pocket between the hills was being transformed into the very scene depicted in the altar carving at Rainier Asylum.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, felt August give her a shake. "Come on, we've got to go—now!" He thrust his hand into her grasp and then led her away from the house by the arm, into the woods, bobbing this way and that to avoid errant branches and to seek out the simplest path out of the hills. They had gone less than a minute, full-tilt and certain that the pale woman was breathing down their necks, when the ground beneath their feet took on a steeper gradient and they were forced to climb. Soreness and fatigue were washed away in an instant by a current of sheer terror, and the pair clawed and crawled up the hill using whatever they could find in reach for leverage. Jagged branches rent their palms and dry needles scraped their faces as they burst up the hillside and through the dense growth.

The burning house to their back emitted a low roar as the flames grew and its very bones were turned to ash. Even as



they built some distance from it the air proved fouler with the smell of carrion than it did the smell of smoke. Sadie turned as they reached the summit of the hill, looking up through the breaks in the canopy at the impressive plume of smoke that tickled the gunmetal underbelly of the sky.

She looked, too, for that smiling figure walking through the trees, certain that the boughs all about her were soon to droop and the hearty trunks to grow flaccid in her diabolical presence. The curious shadow that attended her had overtaken the house completely so that one unfamiliar with the site could not have guessed at the source of the smoke overhead. Some few dozen yards behind, the woods they'd only moments ago tread in a frenzy had been tainted by that shade of midnight, and she saw certain of the great trees she'd clung to for support were now unsteady, set to crumble.

Once more, August led the charge. He all but dragged her onward, down the other side of the hill, and the going proved so steep that they only managed a few staggered paces before they lost their footing and hit the ground. They rolled down precipitously with no little violence, Sadie's arms and legs meeting the soggy ground with dull thuds and her vision blurred by a bump to the head.

Tangled in a low growth that had helped to break her fall, Sadie struggled to regain her feet. Dizzied and unsteady, she staggered down a few more steps and sank to her knees on level ground, panting. She found the handcam sitting in the grass nearby and clutched it to her chest, looking about the field in a frenzy. "A-August, you OK?"

The undergrowth rustled and a bedraggled August crawled out from the morass with dead leaves sticking out of his fiery hair. "Keep going," he insisted, throwing a hand in the direction of the road. "Get to the car!"

She sucked in a few breaths, focused expectantly on the mess of hillocks and on the column of black smoke that was now likely visible from miles away. No figure came from that hilltop, and the shadow had ceased its pursuit. The smell of decaying flesh had waned, too—carried off by the sharp winds

that now stirred the ruins of Winslow Manor into a raging pyre.

She and August limped as quickly as they could across the field, making progress toward the road where his Honda and the abandoned sedan had been left, though the cars were no longer alone along the shoulder. Parked several feet behind the cars was an eighteen-wheeler, its bearded driver standing outside its passenger-side door and marveling at the smoke in the distance.

“Hey,” called the driver, waving. “You all right? What’s going on over there?” He pointed into the hills.

The exhausted pair stumbled toward him and finally collapsed onto the gravel of the shoulder. “T-There’s a house fire,” managed Sadie between ragged breaths.

“A *house fire*?” He gave her a strange look. “You mean to say there’s a house out there in those hills?”

She nodded aggressively, unable to draw enough breath to speak further.

“I just finished a run and was on my merry way when I saw all that smoke out there. I’m calling this in, just sit tight.” With a grunt, he threw open his cab and got on the CB.

Seated on the shoulder, she and August watched the darkening of the horizon as the fire consumed the nightmarish old house. The truck driver attempted to make conversation while they waited for the authorities, but neither she nor August could find it in themselves to speak. Within several minutes the pastoral silence was pierced by sirens, and the two of them couldn’t help but shudder at the sound, which so resembled the noxious crowing of the house’s doomed wardens.

““**W**hy didn’t she come after us?” asked Sadie, head pressed to the passenger side window.

August idled in the driver’s seat, fiddling with his handcam and looking out at the field, now filled with flashing reds and blues. “I guess she wasn’t ready yet. Maybe the time isn’t right.”

Sadie looked up into the evening sky and sought out the tendrils of haze that still rose from between the hills. The blaze had died down a bit over the past few hours, and the authorities—with no little difficulty—had sought to put it out with mixed results. Based on Sadie’s testimony they were now attempting to retrieve the bodies within, and requested that she stay put for more questioning. She wondered if the firefighters would encounter her mother in the wreckage—if she would prey on them. “Do you think it’s safe for them to poke around there? Do you think that she might... hurt them?”

August shook his head. “I think they’ll be all right. Your mother doesn’t seem to like attention, so I imagine she snuck off when she heard the sirens. As to where she is now?” He sighed. “Maybe she’s gone back to the asylum...”

They sank into silence, watching the firefighters mill about the hillside. With little else to do, Sadie switched on the dome light and pulled out her father’s journal, flipping through it and seeking out the last entry she’d read. When she’d glanced over the end of it as a refresher, she tried moving on but found the next few pages were empty. She went further, paged through

another dozen that were either blank or scarcely written upon, before she managed to find something like another entry. From the very first this passage struck her as different, however. The writing was still her father's, no doubt, but it was neater, more painstakingly written, and as she glanced over it, she realized it was a note intended for someone in particular.

*Sadie, it began. If you're reading this, I can't imagine the questions you must have. I know you'll think me a monster for having lied to you, and I can't fault you for that. From the very start, I was never honest about your mother. If you've gotten ahold of this journal, it's only because something has happened to me, and I expect you now understand why I couldn't tell you the truth.*

*Your mother isn't of this world. She's a terror in the truest sense of the word, and if she has her way the entire world will slip into a nightmare it can't wake up from. It would have been easier, maybe, had I never met your mother—had you never been born—but I loved you from the moment I first held you in my arms. You are the greatest joy I've ever known in life.*

*Life is filled with suffering. From the cradle to the grave we're faced with constant troubles. That's just how things are in this world. But suffering has value—and from even the darkest corners wonderful things can emerge. You were brought into this life to generate pain, to facilitate evil—and yet you've done the opposite, bringing only happiness and light into the world. The foul people who brought your mother into the realm of the living value the suffering of others for their own gain, but you have grown into a beautiful young woman despite all their plans.*

*The way forward is simple. Deprive them of that suffering. Don't give in; don't fixate on where you came from. You'll only fall into despair. And don't fight them—this isn't a battle that can be won with sheer muscle. I wish that Marcus and I had known that going into it. Ease the suffering of others wherever you go. Leave those terrible creatures nothing to feed on; when starved, they'll sulk back into the shadows like the dogs they are.*

*All this time I've sought a remedy to her evil—a way to stop the nightmare her followers set in motion all those years ago. Little did I know that the answer was right under my nose—in the form of a giggly little girl who enjoys reading a little too much. I wonder what it is you're doing now, Sadie. Did you become a librarian after all? I hope so—the job would suit you!*

*I've packaged a floppy disk containing a more thorough writeup of my research. It should answer many of your questions. I'd considered hand-writing it, but figured it better to keep up with the times for the sake of longevity. If you need any further help or protection, please seek out Marcus Halloran. He's a good man—a little stubborn, but the best friend I've ever known.*

*No one has any control over how they come into the world, but no matter how awful the circumstances of your birth, no matter your mother's true nature, please know that you were loved, Sadie—and that I love you even now. I hope that you can forgive me the great and many lies I told you to keep the truth of your birth a secret, but believe me when I say this: To be your father has been my life's greatest privilege.*

*With love,*

*Dad*

She cleared the mist from her eyes and turned the page—though disappointingly the remainder of the journal proved blank. Shutting the thing, she held it tightly in hand and drew in a deep breath. It brought her no little comfort to read her father's posthumous note; she savored this reminder of his love and spent a few moments rereading it.

“What's the matter?” asked August, wary of the tears in her eyes. “Find something bad in there?”

She shook her head. “No, actually it was just what I needed.”

The pair were startled by a knock on the passenger side window of the car. Outside, a stern-faced cop waited, arms akimbo. She set the journal down and hurriedly rolled down

the window. “Excuse me, miss, I have some questions about what went on inside that house.”

“Oh, sure. What can I help you with?”

The officer pulled a notepad from his back pocket and flipped through a series of notes. “It’s a mess in there. Even aside from the fire, the bodies we’ve recovered look...” He paused here, stubbled face contorting into a disgusted scowl. “Well, what can you tell me about them? Did you know them?”

Sadie recalled the house’s two prisoners—the young pair leashed to the house by her mother—and shuddered. “I didn’t know them, but I think that car might’ve been theirs.” She motioned to the abandoned sedan parked just behind them.

The police officer made a few marks on his notepad, nodding. “Right, and the other one?”

*Sinistrari*, she thought. “Yes, there was one other one. The older man. I believe his body had been in the house for a long time—many years, and that it’s the body of the house’s former owner, Alessio Sinistrari.”

At this, the cop gave her an odd look. “An *older* man? No, no, the one I’m talking about is younger. About five-six, five-seven. Red hair—looked mid-twenties to me.”

Now it was Sadie’s turn to give an odd look. “I’m sorry, what?” She cracked a little grin. “I didn’t see a body matching that description inside, but that almost sounds like my friend August here—”

She turned to the driver’s seat.

Save for the handcam, it was empty.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Once upon a time, a young Ambrose Ibsen discovered a collection of ghost stories on his father's bookshelf. He was never the same again.

Apart from horror fiction, he enjoys good coffee, brewed strong.

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