

The Disturbing Tales of Tyler West

By Landon Purser

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Smashwords Edition

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For Lyla and Lillian

About This Collection

These six short stories are about a brother and sister, who find themselves thrown into a world of danger and horror after the sudden death of their mother. Each of these stories has a beginning, middle and end, however they are episodic in nature and have an overarching plot that strings them together. In order to get the best possible reading experience I recommend reading them in order.

The Demon Under The Church

“Are you sure you still want to go down there? Like I said before if your sister went into the catacombs she is probably dead already.” Vincent said.

“I have to try. I owe it to Cassie. Even if she’s dead I should try to find her body so she can have a proper burial.” I answered.

Vincent gave me a long searching look, and then shrugged his shoulders and gestured for me to follow him. I had met him in the alley next to The Stillwater Museum like he instructed. It was a dark night with clouds covering the moon. Vincent led me over to a manhole cover and lifted it up with ease. Even in my heightened state of nervousness

I realized that Vincent must be incredibly strong to move it without even grunting in effort.

There were a series of metal rungs sticking out of the side of the hole acting as a ladder. Vincent quickly began climbing down into the darkness. I took a breath to gather my nerves and then followed after him. We descended into some kind of sewer tunnel. The ladder rungs ended at a raised walkway on the side of the tunnel.

“Did you bring a light like I told you to?” Vincent asked.

“Yeah one second.” I said, and I took off my backpack.

It was difficult to unzip my backpack in the dark, but I eventually managed it. I pulled my hunting crossbow out of my backpack, which I had attached a flashlight to with duct tape. I clicked on the flashlight which sent a beam of light slicing through the darkness. The concrete walls and walkway were now clearly visible as well as the river of waste flowing slowly beside us.

“I told you to bring a weapon and you brought a crossbow?” Vincent said, shaking his head.

“It was the best I could do on short notice.” I replied.

“Oh you are so gonna die.” Vincent groaned before turning to lead the way down the walkway.

I must admit that his total lack of faith in me combined with the unsettling surroundings made me second guess myself. This was the third night since my sister’s disappearance. The last time I saw her she said that she and her friends were going to explore the tunnels under the city. I did not have a good feeling about it but this was the first time she had expressed a desire to go out and have some fun since our mom died. I told myself she would be fine because she was going with a group and apparently one of them had been down there multiple times before.

When a day passed and she did not return I started getting worried. On the morning of the second day I went to the police station to report a missing person. The policeman I spoke to was friendly, he filed the missing person report and promised me that the Stillwater Police would be on the lookout for her.

When I suggested that a search party should search the tunnels for the missing girls

however, he was dismissive of the idea. He assured me that would not be necessary, which surprised and alarmed me. When I asked what I could do to assist the police he told me to just leave it to the professionals.

I left the police station significantly more worried than I arrived. After thinking it over for a few hours I came to a decision. If the police would not search my sister's last known whereabouts then I would just have to do it myself. I spent the rest of the day and a good part of the night looking for someone who knew their way around the tunnels.

Eventually I snuck into The Cave nightclub because it was the only place still open in town. I spoke to everyone that I could and was mostly ignored or given strange stares. I finally got lucky when I asked one of the bartenders. She was fairly guarded and asked several questions about why I wanted to go down there. After I explained the situation to her she told me that she knew someone who could guide me down there. She asked one of the bouncers to take over for her at the bar so that she could take a break. About ten minutes after she vanished into the crowd Vincent appeared behind me.

He asked me if I had any idea which part of the underground the girls went into. I told him my sister had said something about catacombs under the church and museum. After I told him that, Vincent refused to help me. I pleaded with him and he told me that a monster lived down in the catacombs. After some more begging Vincent finally agreed to show me the way to the entrance of the catacombs and after that I would be on my own.

These thoughts passed through my mind as I followed Vincent down the tunnel. We traveled about forty feet down the tunnel when we reached a metal door on the side of the tunnel. Vincent pulled a ring of keys out of his pocket and used one of them to unlock the door. It swung open with a metallic groan, and Vincent gestured for me to go ahead of him. I stepped through the doorway clutching my crossbow with the flashlight taped to it.

I stepped into a dark room filled with cardboard boxes, wooden crates and old metal filing cabinets. Vincent closed the door behind us.

“This is the basement of the museum. One of the entrances to the catacombs is in here.”

Vincent said.

Vincent led the way to a specific large wooden crate and pushed it easily to the side like it was on wheels. Under the crate there was a trapdoor which Vincent lifted up revealing some stairs going down even deeper under the city.

Vincent led the way down the stairs and I followed cautiously. The stairs and walls down here were made of stone instead of concrete. At the bottom of the stairs the tunnel continued for another ten feet before reaching an archway. It was covered with symbols that were painted in a red substance that I feared was blood. Embedded in the keystone at the top of the arch there was a glowing red crystal that was gently pulsing.

“My family does not have any weapons or magic around here that is capable of destroying the monster, so we have done the next best thing and imprisoned it down here. Eventually the executioners will come and kill the beast but since it is currently contained this one is quite low on their priority list.” Vincent said as he walked up to the archway.

“What exactly is it?” I asked.

“It is one of the ancient horrors that has stalked the earth for thousands of years. A twisted creation of the corruptors. This particular one we call the Wumpus.”

“The Wumpus? Seriously?” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Hey I didn’t come up with the name. And I guarantee that you won’t be laughing when you see it. This is where I leave you. If you are having any second thoughts this is your last chance to walk away.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed all of this monster talk but I could not deny that everything about this experience seemed crazy. I decided it was better to be safe than sorry so I loaded my crossbow and asked Vincent. “If your family can’t kill this thing why did you tell me to bring a weapon?”

“You can’t kill a bear with bear spray but it might leave you alone for awhile. The beast may be immortal but it still dislikes pain.”

“So if my sister encountered this monster in there what would it do to her?”

“Most likely kill her and eat her. Unless... never mind.”

“What?”

“I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you; if by some miracle the Wumpus doesn’t kill you first.”

“Fine, I guess I should thank you for taking me this far.”

Vincent covered his mouth and laughed. “Believe me kid the last thing you should be doing is thanking me.”

“Well see you later, maybe.” I said and I turned to face the arch.

I took a deep breath and then stepped through. I’m not sure what I was expecting. According to Vincent this was a magical barrier so I was slightly surprised when nothing happened. I glanced back one last time and was shocked to discover that Vincent had vanished without a sound. Finding myself alone I felt a sudden rush of panic and for a moment I almost left immediately. After closing my eyes and counting to ten I calmed down enough to venture deeper into the catacombs.

I had been to The Church of Saint Benedict a few times and the architecture of these catacombs matched the style of the church above.

The walls and floor were made of stone and the ceiling was a series of crisscrossing arches holding up who knows how much dirt and the church above.

That first passageway continued for about fifty feet before opening up to a larger room. In the center of the room there was a wide pit about ten feet in diameter. I pointed the beam of my flashlight down into the pit and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The pit was filled with thousands of human bones. The remains of hundreds of poor people who could not afford a burial plot and gravestone.

There were three other passages out of the room. I chose one of the passages at random. I took out my hunting knife, the only other weapon I had, and scratched a mark in the stone. That passage led through two smaller rooms which were also filled with bones. There were stacks of femurs and pyramids of skulls. The macabre artwork of whoever was tasked with bringing remains down here. The passageway ended at an intersection with another passageway going left to right. I took the right turn, marking the stone again with my knife.

The second passage continued for about thirty feet before reaching another room. This room was the first one to not have any bones. Whether the bones had been removed by someone or this room was never filled I did not know. In the center of the room there was an elaborate symbol drawn with chalk on the stone.

The symbol was surrounded by a circle of wax puddles from candles that had burned all the way down. Scattered around the room, outside the circle, there were about two dozen scraps of paper many of which were dirty or partially burned. On the pages there was writing in a language I did not recognize. There were also strange symbols and disturbing illustrations on them.

The whole room looked like a set from a horror movie. I stood there taking it all in, wondering what all of this could be about. After thinking it over for a moment, I gathered up all of the loose pages and put them in my backpack. I would give those papers a closer look when I got out of the catacombs.

There was only one other way out of this chamber, another passageway that curved to the left. As I was walking down this passage I saw

something on the wall out of the corner of my eye. I turned the beam of my flashlight on it and saw that it was blood spatter on the wall. I felt my stomach tighten. In a way this was worse than seeing the pit filled with bones. Those people were dead before they were carried down here. Whoever lost this blood was alive when they came down here. The blood appeared to be old which was a small comfort to me. I was fairly confident that this blood did not come from my sister.

I continued into the next room where I saw what was left of the person whose blood was on the wall. There was a pile of bones which looked much newer than the bones in the other rooms. Many of these bones were broken and all of them had teeth marks on them. It was while I was studying these bones that I first heard it. The sound of slow heavy breathing.

The sound sent shivers down my spine, and not in a good way. The knot in my stomach got even tighter. There were three other ways out of this room and the sounds of breathing were definitely coming from the passageway that was straight ahead. I shined the beam of my flashlight down that way but the passage curved to the right

making it impossible to see what or who was making the noise.

I knew that I should investigate the noise. After all I was trying to find my sister and that might have been her or one of her friends breathing. But deep down I was afraid. That noise did not sound like the breathing of a teenage girl, it was far too deep and loud. What if Vincent had been telling me the truth? What if that was the breathing of a monster. I ended up going left instead. I tried to move as slowly and quietly as I possibly could.

There was no passageway on the left side, the doorway simply led right into another room. A room that I won't forget for the rest of my life. The room was very similar to every other room down here. The reason I will never forget this room is because of what was inside it.

In one of the corners of the room I saw one of my sister's friends, a girl named Rachel. Her chest was ripped open and all of her organs were missing. Her face was contorted into a horrible silent scream testifying to pain of her final moments. There was blood everywhere, it was dry but definitely newer than the blood in the other room and the curved passageway. I could smell the

body all the way from across the room. Rachel had been dead for at least a couple of days, she might have even died the first night they came down here.

I spent about thirty seconds taking in this horrific scene, and then I vomited all over the floor. At this point I was done. Vincent was right, there really was a monster down here. My sister was already dead and I would be too if I did not get out as fast as I could. I turned around to go back into the other room and retrace my steps back to the museum basement. That's when I saw it for the first time.

It was about six feet tall, five feet wide and ten feet long making it a little bigger than a fully grown grizzly bear. Its skin was dark red and stretched tight over its muscular body. It had glowing yellow eyes and an enormous mouth filled with rows of sharp pointy teeth. Vincent was right, the Wumpus was far scarier than the name implies.

The moment I saw it I panic fired my crossbow. The bolt struck the Wumpus in the corner of its left eye. I would like to say that it was skill, but to be honest it was a lucky shot. The monster screamed in pain and rage. I turned and ran away as fast as I could. I no longer made any

attempt to mark my path. I ran down passageways and through half a dozen rooms. I almost fell into another pit filled with bones and I knocked over a pyramid of skulls.

I kept running until my heart felt like it might burst. I slowed down a bit as I looked nervously behind me. There was no sign of the Wumpus anywhere. I thought that I might pass out. My hands were shaking, my breath was coming in gasps. There was a part of me that wanted to just collapse on the ground and give up.

That's when I heard a girl crying. The sound seemed to be coming from a room on my right. I approached cautiously and peered around the corner. Inside the room there were three figures chained to the wall. Two of them were friends of Cassie, named Kayla and Susan. Similar to Rachel their chests were ripped open and their organs were missing. The third figure was curled up in a ball and was crying. It was my sister.

"Cassie! You're alive!" I said as I rushed to her side.

Cassie looked up, surprised to hear my voice. She looked at me with a mixture of hope and fear.

“Tyler? How did you get here? You shouldn’t have come, it will kill you!”

“I’m going to get you out of here Cassie. Everything is going to be fine.” I said with far more confidence than I felt.

I took out my hunting knife and slid it into the cuff of her shackle. The shackles were quite old, and I was high on adrenaline, so I was able to break open the cuffs with a bit of leverage.

“Do you have any idea how to get out here?”

“No they grabbed us and blindfolded us in the first room we went into.”

“They? Who’s they?”

“The people who were down here waiting for us. Christine led us right to them. I think she might be one of them.”

“Christine, is she the one you said has been down here before?”

“Yes it was her idea to come down here and the people didn’t chain her up.”

This was very concerning to hear. Vincent didn’t say anything about people coming down here to do things. In fact he implied that everyone who comes down here meets a terrible death which was

clearly not the case. I wondered if Vincent might be a part of this group, but if that were the case why would he try to persuade me not to come down here? And why would he warn me to bring a weapon? There was no time to properly think these things through. I needed to get Cassie out this hell hole.

“Can you stand? We need to find a way out of here.”

“I think so.” she said as she stood up with a little assistance from me.

“They came and brought me food a couple of times. They always came from that way.” She said pointing to one of the three ways out of the room.

“I guess that’s the best bet we have for now. I’ll keep an eye out for anything that I recognize.”

The two of us travelled through the catacombs as quietly as we could. I quickly realized there was a problem with my plan to look out for anything familiar. We passed by two more pits filled with bones and three more rooms filled with strange bone artwork. The catacombs seemed to reuse the same three or four room designs over and over again making it impossible to look for familiar

landmarks. The more we wandered the more obvious it became that we were hopelessly lost. It was a disorienting feeling, to be in surroundings so recognizable but still have no idea where I was.

Our lack of progress started to have an affect on both of us. I was jumping every time a shadow moved in an unexpected way and Cassie was shaking uncontrollably. After what seemed like an eternity we came across something that we had not seen before.

We entered a room that was identical to half a dozen rooms we had seen before, except for one major difference. The ground was moving. I aimed my flashlight lower and it revealed a swarm of at least two hundred rats on the ground. They were filthy and quite large. Cassie screamed when she saw them. Which startled me and I panic fired my crossbow. The bolt skewered one of them, it was a bad shot but there were so many of them it would have been hard not to hit any.

From somewhere else in the catacombs the roar of the Wumpus came echoing towards us. The beast had heard Cassie scream and now it knew where we were. The rats seemed to be thinking the same thing I was, because the moment they heard

the monster roar they all began to move as one towards the passageway on the right.

I was terrified. I had encountered that creature and survived once, I doubted I would be so lucky the second time. I stood there petrified for several moments then I had an idea.

“We have to follow the rats, they must know a way out of here.” I said, as I grabbed Cassie’s hand and started pulling her along after the rat swarm. She did not seem happy with the idea but she did not offer any resistance.

The rats went right, then straight, then left, then right, and finally straight. The passage ended at an intersection with another passage. There was a small crack at the bottom of the wall and the rats were fighting each other to squeeze into it. My heart sank when I saw this. I was right the rats did know a way out but I should have guessed that their way would not work for us.

That’s when I heard it again. The deep heavy breathing of the Wumpus. It was in the tunnel behind us. Cassie squeezed my hand tighter as she heard it too. My crossbow was unloaded because I shot that stupid rat by accident. I still had my hunting knife but I was pretty sure that would be

useless against this thing, because I would have to get within easy reach of its long arms. There was only one thing left that I could think of.

“Run!” I shouted to Cassie, and the two of us bolted down the passageway on the left. The ground and walls started to shake slightly as the Wumpus came lumbering after us. Just like last time I was not thinking at all about which way was out. I just wanted to keep away from this monster to extend my life a few more precious seconds.

We ran into a room which was the first unique room that I had seen in hours. The center of the room was dominated by a three foot tall cross carved out of stone and sitting on a raised pedestal. Cassie let out a gasp of recognition when she saw it and turned sharply to the right.

“Follow me!” She yelled, as she disappeared down another passageway. I followed her as fast as I could without passing her. If this thing was going to get one of us it would be me.

Up ahead I could see light and an archway similar to the one under the museum. The Wumpus was getting closer behind me. I actually felt its breath on my neck.

Cassie made it through the archway and I was right behind her. Just before I crossed over I felt the demon's claws rip into the back of my right leg. I stumbled forward and fell on the ground just outside the archway.

There was a flash of red light and a hissing sound as the Wumpus howled in pain. I rolled over and looked up at the beast looming over me. There was fury in its yellow eyes. I was so close but it could not touch me. It roared with anger and began slamming its body into the wall next to the archway. The tunnel shook slightly but the magical arch barely moved. The beast kept trying even though it seemed to know that it was useless. We had escaped and there was nothing the Wumpus could do about it.

“Come on let’s get out of here.” Cassie said, offering me a hand.

With her help I was able to climb the steps. The gash on the back of my thigh was pretty bad and I was leaving a trail of blood behind. The stairs led to a crypt with two rows of tombs which held the remains of bishops, mayors and other people of importance to the church and city. On the other end of the crypt there was another staircase which went

up to the actual church. By the time we reached the chapel I was struggling to stay on my feet.

“You look like you could use some help my son.” I turned and saw a middle aged man wearing a dark suit and a clerical collar.

“Yes he fell down and hurt himself.” Cassie said quickly.

“Come with me, there is a first aid kit in my office.” The priest said, as he turned and led the way.

He led us to a small door which led to a small office. The priest retrieved a box from one of the drawers in his desk and instructed me to sit down and put my leg up on another chair. The priest sat down next to me and started to treat my leg with a speed and skill that would suggest professional training.

“So what are your names, may I ask?”

Both Cassie and I were reluctant to answer any questions. How could we explain who we were and what we just went through.

“They call me Father Michaels.” He said when he saw we were not forthcoming.

“I saw the two of you come up the stairs out of the crypt. Now I have been in the chapel all

morning and I am quite certain that I did not see the two of you go down there to begin with.”

Cassie and I glanced at each other nervously.

“Of course there is another way to get into the crypt...” Father Michaels gave us a meaningful look as he let the sentence hang in the air.

Cassie and I said nothing, so Father Michaels just came out and asked us directly.

“Did you come from the catacombs?”

Since he already knew the answer I figured it would be best to tell the truth.

“Yes.” I said.

“And from the looks of this you also met the monster down there.”

“Yes I did.”

“And yet you survived. That is very impressive. I have never heard of anyone surviving an encounter with the beast except for its followers of course.”

“Followers?”

“Oh yes there is a small group of fanatics in town who believe that the creature is some kind of dark god. They offer it sacrifices sometimes

foolishly thinking that it will grant them power in return.”

“Do they enter the catacombs through the church? Have you ever tried to stop them?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. I believe there is another entrance to the catacombs somewhere else in the city that they use. As for trying to stop them, I have reported what I know to the police several times and they have done nothing about it.”

Cassie and I glanced at each other without saying a word. We both knew that she had been taken down to the catacombs through the church. Which meant that Father Michael was either unaware of what was happening in the church at night or he was one of them.

“What exactly were the two of you doing down there anyway?” Father Michaels asked casually.

“We got lost exploring the sewers.” I lied.

Father Michaels glanced at my backpack which had my crossbow clearly sticking out of it.

“How fortunate that you had that with you when you got lost in a labyrinth with a monster in it.”

I was about to make up some excuse when Father Michaels cut me off.

“Don’t worry I would be cautious too if our positions were reversed. Anyway your leg should be fine for now. Change the bandage in a few days and take it easy for a few weeks.”

“Thank you Father. I would appreciate it if you would keep this between the three of us.”

“Sure on one condition. Once you are feeling better come back so we can have a little chat. That monster trapped under the church isn’t the only evil that preys on our city. Someone with your talent could make a huge difference to our town.”

“Sure I’ll definitely come back sometime.” I had no intention of keeping that promise, but I said it anyway.

“Alright, it was a pleasure meeting both of you. God bless you, and have a safe journey home.”

With my leg bandaged up we made it home without too much difficulty. A month passed and Cassie was even worse off than when mom died. She refused to leave the house for any reason, and mostly stayed in her room. She would wake up

screaming in the night, calling out for mom or me or both us. I continued working my job three days a week, but other than that I mostly stayed home with Cassie.

Cassie started gaining weight and at first I thought she might be stress eating. However the lack of dirty dishes in the sink and a week of watching the contents of the refrigerator quickly disproved that theory. I was starting to lose sleep wondering what was wrong with her and what I could do to help her. Then one morning I heard her vomiting in the bathroom and a terrible thought occurred to me. I gently knocked on the bathroom door a few times and Cassie eventually opened it. She looked absolutely miserable and I was about to ask a question I really did not want to.

“Cas, are you pregnant?”

Cassie didn't say anything. She just burst into tears.

A Deal With The Devil

“It’s pretty cold in here.” A voice behind me said.

I jumped a little bit and almost dropped the egg carton in my hands. I was doing my job at the local grocery store. I was restocking the freezer cooler section and no one was supposed to be in there but me. And yet a middle aged man wearing a grey suit and a dark purple tie was standing by the doorway watching me.

“I like it in here.” I said trying to sound calm and confident. “ I can work hard and not break a sweat.”

“Yes that’s true, and I imagine that’s nice since you have had plenty of reasons to sweat recently.”

“Who are you? And more importantly why shouldn’t I throw you out right now.”

The man laughed at my threat.

“You’ve got some balls kid, but I would expect nothing less from someone who has faced the master and lived to tell the tale.” As soon as he said that I pulled my hunting knife out of my jacket pocket.

It was against company policy to bring weapons to work, but I had been breaking that rule ever since my sister was kidnaped two months prior. The man raised his hands up when he saw my knife.

“Take it easy, I’m just here to talk.”

“And why would I want to talk to scum like you mr...”

“Murdock, Malcolm Murdock at your service.”

“Well Mr. Murdock you say that you’re here to talk and you still haven’t given me a good reason not to throw you out so I suggest you start talking.”

“How is your sister doing?”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, just a question. How is her pregnancy coming along?”

“Very quickly, as I’m sure you are aware.”

“Ah yes, the master’s seed does not waste any time.”

“If your goal is to make me want to cut out your tongue, then you are doing a fantastic job.”

“This may shock you to hear Tyler, but I actually hold no ill will towards you. You love your sister and when she went missing you did whatever was necessary to bring her home safe and sound. I understand completely. I am a father myself and I have done plenty of stupid and terrible things to protect my children. I would have done the exact same thing in your position.”

“So what? You just came by to tell me that there are no hard feelings about me shooting your god in the eye?”

“Yes and also to deliver a message from the master himself.”

“How did I know there was going to be a catch?”

Murdock ignored my sarcasm and took a couple steps forward.

“The master would like your sister to know that he understands if she does not wish to return to him. The master knows it can be difficult for some humans to love him.”

“Well that’s the understatement of the year.”

Once again Murdock ignored my comment and continued with his message.

“However the master does insist that his child be returned to him. I have been instructed to make arrangements to collect the child as soon as it is born. If you and your sister agree to cooperate the master gives his word that you shall have nothing to fear from him or those of us that serve him.”

I cast my memory back to my brief encounter with the gigantic monster under the city. I could vividly remember its claws ripping into the back of my leg.

“This all sounds very nice and reasonable Mr. Murdock. But the thing is that I’ve met your boss, and I can think of a lot of words to describe the Wumpus. Trustworthy isn’t of them.”

Murdock frowned and took a couple more steps towards me.

“I suggest that you never call my master by that derogatory slur in my presence ever again.”

“Okay how about I call him whatever you called Cassie’s three friends who died down there. What did you call them by the way? Lunch? Dinner? Chew toys?”

“This conversation is becoming unproductive. Do you have an answer for my master?”

“I’ll have to talk to Cassie about it. It’s her kid too after all.”

“Of course take some time to think it over. I will need an answer before the child is born however.”

“Well it seems you know where to find me.”

“Indeed I do. Oh, and one last thing. I understand that you are trying to get guardianship over your sister. I imagine that has become a lot more difficult since she disappeared for four days and ended up pregnant under very suspicious circumstances. That’s not going to look good to the judge. I have some friends at the courthouse and I would be more than happy to help you. After the two of you hand over the child of course. It would be such a tragedy for you to risk life and limb to be reunited with your sister, only to have the law take her away from you again.”

I stayed silent while Murdock said all of this. I wanted to take my knife and split his sneering face open, but I knew that was a bad idea. Once he finished saying his piece he turned around and

walked out of the cooler. I just stood there for a moment looking down at the knife in my right hand and the carton eggs I was still holding in my left. Then I smashed the egg carton on the ground as hard as I could and let out an angry yell. Smashing the eggs made me feel a little better but now I had to clean up the mess.

As I was mopping up the egg yokes my mind was preoccupied with what had just happened. In some ways this was worse than facing the Wumpus. At least with that demon I could run from it or shoot a crossbow at it. As much as I wanted to put a few crossbow bolts into Mr. Murdock I knew that would end with me going to jail. I knew what he did to Cassie and her friends but the police did not. Or worse it was possible that they did know and were part of this strange cult. As much as I hated to admit it, Murdock was right, there was a strong possibility that Cassie and I would be separated.

When our mother died she named me as Cassie's guardian in her will. Unfortunately she died three months before my eighteenth birthday so I was technically not an adult yet and therefore not eligible to be her guardian. The people from social

services came to the house three times to take her away and each time she refused to go with them. On the third occasion she actually ran away to avoid going with them. In the end a compromise was reached, Cassie and I were allowed to stay together on the condition that we allow a social worker to come check up on us regularly. They said this would be a kind of trial period for me to prove that I was responsible enough to be Cassie's guardian.

At first things were going very well. Cassie and I were still in school. Mother had left us the house, the car, her retirement savings and a good life insurance policy, so money was not an issue for us. I decided to keep working my part time job at the grocery store even though we didn't need the money. I figured having a job would help show that I was responsible enough to take care of Cassie.

The social worker assigned to check up on us, Mrs. Lazdale, was a kind old lady who was very encouraging and supportive of my efforts to prove that I could take care of Cassie.

Everything was going well until school ended. With nothing to occupy her time Cassie started to slip into a depression. I tried to

encourage her to go out and enjoy her summer, but she showed little interest in leaving the house. And then came that fateful day that her friends finally convinced her to go with them to explore some secret tunnels.

Mrs. Lazdale of course noticed that Cassie disappeared for four days. She also noticed the extreme change in her behaviour after she returned, and of course she discovered that Cassie was pregnant about the same time I did. Mrs. Lazdale went from being my greatest ally to my worst nightmare. To be fair to her, she was just doing her job. But that didn't change the fact that she was doing everything in her power to have Cassie taken away from me.

These negative thoughts and many more like them occupied my mind for the rest of my shift and the drive home. I pulled into the driveway and went inside. The house was dark and quiet. Mrs. Lazdale was not there and I assumed that Cassie was in her room as usual. I made my way upstairs to Cassie's room and gently knocked on the door.

"Come in." Cassie said, and I slowly opened the door.

Cassie was sitting on the bed reading a book by the light of her bedside lamp. Despite only being two months pregnant she looked like she was seven months pregnant. I guess demon babies develop faster than normal babies.

Cassie did not look up from her book when I entered her room, so I simply walked over and sat on the edge of her bed. The book she was reading was called 'How to Protect Yourself From Evil by Elizabeth Wittwer.' Cassie had requested that I check that book out of the library for her two days earlier, and she had hardly put it down since. I skimmed through the book when I got it and it appeared to be about some kind of witchcraft. Two months earlier I would have called it a bunch of mumbo jumbo but now I had no idea what to believe.

"How are you doing Cas?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"I'm fine." She lied

"I thought you finished that book?"

"I did, I'm reading it again."

"Oh okay. Listen, I don't want to alarm you but, I met someone at work today who claims to speak for... the thing."

Cassie didn't say anything but I noticed her hands grip the book a little tighter.

"He said that the thing understands if you don't want to go back there, but apparently it wants the child. He said that if we give the baby to him after it's born they will leave us alone."

Once again Cassie said nothing.

"Well what do you think?"

"I don't trust them Tyler."

"Well that makes two of us, but I'm worried about what they might do if we refuse."

"I can't give them the baby Tyler."

"Why not?"

"Something bad will happen."

This conversation was starting to sound like one we had when I first found out she was pregnant. I suggested that she have an abortion and she insisted that if she aborted the baby or tried to kill it after it was born something terrible would happen. Now here she was saying basically the same thing. I was starting to wonder if it was possible that her motherly instincts might be kicking in, and she might be thinking about keeping it.

"Look you don't have to decide anything now. All I'm asking is that you think about it. I'll be

honest I have no idea what is going to happen when the baby is born. And that fear of the unknown is terrifying.”

Another week passed mostly uneventful. Cassie renewed that library book and read it for a third and fourth time. I had a heated discussion with Mrs. Lazdale about my crossbow being left on the kitchen table. Ever since the events in the catacombs I had been taking lots of extra precautions including always having my crossbow nearby when I was in the house. I had all the locks changed on the doors and windows. I also kept my old school backpack and a duffle bag packed with some clothes and other basic things in case I ever felt like we were not safe in the house. Of course Mrs. Lazdale objected to all of these precautions but I didn't care. I knew how real the danger was and the fact that she was blissfully ignorant was not going to deter me from being prepared.

In the end these preparations proved to be both life saving and damning. It was the next Thursday night six days after my first meeting with Mr. Murdock. I was watching tv in the livingroom and Cassie was upstairs in her room as usual. I was just thinking about going to bed when there

was a knock at the door. The sound startled me a little. We never had any visitors, except for Mrs. Lazdale and she never came by this late.

I picked up my loaded crossbow from beside me on the couch and I went over to the door to look through the peephole. What I saw made my heart sink. It was Mr. Murdock and he was not alone. He had four other goons with him. At least two of the men were clearly hiding something under their jackets and I suspected they were weapons.

It seemed pretty obvious what this was. Murdock had come for the answer to his master's offer and it was clear that an answer in the negative would be unacceptable. I was pretty sure that Cassie had not changed her mind about refusing to give up the baby. Which meant there was only one other option.

I made my way as quickly and quietly up the stairs as I could. I opened the door to Cassie's room without knocking. She was sitting on her bed reading that book again. She looked up in surprise when I burst into her room.

"Cassie we have to go, put your shoes on now!"

Cassie was clearly shocked by my behavior but she did not argue or question me. As she was putting her shoes on there was another knock on the door a little louder this time. Once her shoes were on the two of us hurried back down stairs. My backpack and the duffel bag were at the bottom of the stairs. I grabbed my backpack and Cassie grabbed the duffel bag, she was still holding onto that book as well.

We made our way to the kitchen and the backdoor. There was another loud knock on the front door as I peered through the kitchen window into the backyard to see if Murdock had anyone covering the back of the house. Sure enough there was a fifth thug standing in our backyard watching the backdoor. The knocking at the front door was replaced with a rhythmic pounding. They were trying to break down the front door now. I had maybe thirty seconds to get rid of this guard at the back of the house before Murdock and his men came in through the front.

I took a deep breath, unlocked the backdoor, opened it up and fired. By this time I was not the same marksman I was down in the catacombs. I had spent the past two months

practicing at least one hour a day with my crossbow in the backyard. No more panic shooting. No more relying on luck to survive.

It was a perfect shot. The bolt went right into the man's throat. Unlike the movies, people in the real world don't immediately die when you shoot them with a bow. The man took a half step backwards and just stood there in shock, choking on his own blood. I rushed at him, dropping my crossbow and pulling out my hunting knife. He raised the pistol in his hand but he was too slow.

I tackled him to the ground and tried to cut his throat with my knife. The dying man reached out and grabbed my wrist before I could finish him off. He turned the pistol in his other hand towards me. I grabbed his right hand with my left just in time. I was amazed by how much strength he had despite having a mortal wound. For a moment that seemed to last forever we were locked in a stalemate. I struggled to finish what I started, and he struggled to take me with him.

Slowly he managed to turn his pistol towards my head. I lowered my head instinctively and there was a deafening blast right next to my ear. The bullet missed my head by about three

inches. At that moment I felt myself get cold. I realized this could be the end for me. I may have survived the demon under the church only to be killed by a dying man a couple months later.

It was at that moment that Cassie suddenly appeared right next to us, and kicked the dying man in the side of the head. I don't think she knocked him out, but she definitely dazed him enough for me to break our stalemate. I cut the man's throat wide open and he made one last sputtering gasp before he died.

That was the first time I ever killed someone. I did not have any time to think about it then, but the memory of that moment kept me up several nights the following week.

There was a loud crashing sound from inside the house and I knew that Murdock and his followers had broken down the front door. Cassie had picked up my crossbow where I dropped it, and I grabbed the pistol from the dead man's hand.

Neither one of us said anything. We just ran to the gate in the back fence. The gate led to the alley behind our house. We sprinted down the alley way as fast as we could. Which was not very fast considering that Cassie was very pregnant and I

was still recovering from the leg injury that I got in the catacombs. I heard someone shouting nearby but not coming from our house. One of our neighbors must have heard the gunshot and was now aware that there was danger in the neighborhood.

We kept running for two blocks and then Cassie stopped. She bent over gasping for breath, and vomited on the ground.

“I can’t, I can’t run anymore.” She struggled to say.

“We have to keep moving Cas. You don’t have to run if you don’t want to, but we have to at least keep walking okay?”

Cassie nodded in wordless agreement and the two of us kept walking. We travelled another three blocks and then went into Hammond Park, because it was the best place I could think of to hide at night. We crawled into the bushes by the duck pond and laid down to catch our breath. I was confident that no one would be able to find us here for a few hours at least. A few minutes passed by before we started to hear the squeal of sirens and see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles.

“Do you think they are going to our house?”
Cassie asked.

I nodded and then realized she probably could not see me in the dark.

“Yeah and the worst part is I don’t know if the cops are going there to catch those fanatics or help them look for us.”

A few more minutes passed by when I started to smell smoke. I sat up and looked around. I saw some orange light in the sky in the direction of our neighborhood. It took me a second to realize what was happening, and then my heart sank all the way down to my gut.

“What is it?” Cassie asked.

“They set our house on fire.” I answered.

“What! Why?”

“Punishment for not giving them what they wanted.”

“This is all my fault. I’m so sorry Tyler.”

“It’s not your fault Cas. To be honest I’m not worried about the house, we have insurance. Heck I’m not even worried about the cultists at the moment. They have made such a big scene they must have woken up all the surrounding neighborhoods. They will have no choice but to lay

low until all of this blows over. No, what I'm worried about is what comes next."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid this is going to be the final nail in the coffin. First you were kidnaped and got pregnant, now our house burns down. At this point I don't think there is a judge in the world who would consider me responsible enough to take care of you."

"But Tyler you saved my life twice now."

"I know that and you know that but unfortunately nobody else, except the bad guys, know that."

"So what happens now?"

"Well I imagine that the police or social services will find us sooner or later. When that happens they will say that I've done a poor job of looking after you and then they will take you to live in a foster home."

"But I don't want to go live with a bunch of strangers."

"I know Cas, but I don't see any way out of it now."

At this point Cassie started to cry. I pulled her into a tight hug and the two of us laid back down in the bushes.

“Don’t worry. Wherever they send you I will follow. I will never be too far away.”

“I love you Tyler.”

“I love you too Cassie.”

So there we were hiding in the bushes, holding onto each other tightly. That is how my sister and I spent our last night together.

A Hunter is Born

There were still some lights on at the Miller’s lakehouse, so I was watching through my

binoculars and not my night vision scope. If the family followed their usual routine they would all be in bed within the hour. I took a bite out of my ham sandwich as I watched the house settle down for the night. The window of Cassie's room was on the other side of the house overlooking the lake, so I could not see if she had gone to bed yet. My campsite was set on the best hill for watching the lakehouse, but it still had its limitations. The most important things were that I had a clear view of the front door and the dirt road which was the only way to get to the house. I leaned back and took a swig of hot chocolate as I reflected on how surprisingly pleasant the past month had been.

After Murdock and his followers burned down our house things went basically the way I expected them to. A judge ruled that I was not responsible enough to be Cassie's guardian. And to make matters even worse he also decided that I would only be allowed to visit her once a week. To add insult to injury they sent her to live in a foster home the day before my eighteenth birthday.

Fortunately, once that terrible week was over things actually started looking up. The foster family that Cassie was sent to live with were Mark

and Jane Miller, who lived in Amberley Grove on the other side of Stillwater Lake. Moving to a smaller town thirty miles farther away from the demon under Saint Benedict's Church seemed to raise Cassie's spirit significantly. The Miller's were very welcoming to Cassie and all though she was cautious at first she quickly warmed up to them.

I decided to quit my job at the grocery store and move to Amberley Grove so I could at least be in the same town as Cassie. Only being allowed to see each other once a week was tough on both of us, but having the Miller's taking care of Cassie during the day, and no longer having a job meant that I suddenly had lots of free time on my hands.

I started working out three times a week, taking self defence classes once a week, and going to the shooting range once a week. The day I turned eighteen I went to the fish and game store to load up on equipment. After almost dying twice with nothing but a crossbow to defend myself I decided it was time for some upgrades. I bought a knife and some pepper spray for Cassie, and I also gave her the pistol I took from the dead cultist in our backyard. For myself I bought another pistol, a semiautomatic shotgun, and a hunting rifle with a

night vision scope. I also got some binoculars and camping gear.

My new found freedom also allowed me to finally investigate the mysterious pages I picked up in the ritual room of the Catacombs. I started my investigation by going to The Amberley Grove Public Library. It was literally a one room cabin with about five hundred books in it. I didn't really expect to find any answers there, but I figured I should try there first before going all the way back to Stillwater City.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the librarian was Violet Miller, Mark and Jane Miller's adopted daughter. The Millers were also taking care of a seven year old boy with severe autism named Arthur. Violet was adopted by the Millers when she was a baby. She was shorter than your average girl. She had a pretty face with dark blue eyes and dark purple hair that was just past shoulder length. She always wore t-shirts and jeans. She always wore too many bracelets on her wrists and too many rings on her fingers. She was about eight months younger than me and two and a half years older than Cassie. She seemed surprised when she saw me walk into the library.

“Oh hey. It’s Tyler isn’t it?”

“Yeah and you’re Violet right?”

“The one and only. So tell me what can I do for you?”

“Well you see I found this piece of paper lying on the ground, and I am curious what language this is written on it.” I said as I handed her the page.

In preparation for this I had gone through the papers and found one which had only writing on it. No strange symbols and no graphic illustrations. Violet took a quick look, and then did a double take. She didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I realized she must be reading it.

“Are you reading it?” I asked.

“Huh?” She said looking up quickly. “Oh yes, this is anglo saxon. My mother used to read Beowulf to me in the original old english when I was a little girl.”

“So you know what this says?” I asked, suddenly feeling nervous.

“Yeah I can pick out a few words here and there. For example this word, *geblōt*, means sacrifice, and this word down here, *deofol*, means

devil. If you'd like, I could ask my mom to translate it for you?"

"No, I would rather learn so I can read it myself. Do you have any books here for learning anglo saxon?"

"Are you kidding?" She asked, gesturing at the sparse collection of books on the shelves.

"Fair enough, I guess that was a stupid question. Do you know where I could find books for learning anglo saxon."

"Sure my house. My mom gave me a modern english to anglo saxon dictionary and a copy of beowulf that has the original text and an english translation side by side."

"Do you think I could borrow those?"

She gave me a long hard look before coming to a decision.

"Sure, I guess I'll have plenty of chances to annoy you if you don't bring them back."

"That's true. If I want to see my sister then I have to see you too."

"Yep. If you come back tomorrow I'll bring those books with me to work."

"Alright, I'll be here."

"You better."

And that is how my unusual relationship with Violet Miller started. As well as the difficult process of learning anglo saxon. I went to the library the next day and picked up the books. I tried studying them on my own at first, but I quickly discovered that learning old english is a lot more complicated than learning french or spanish. I returned to the library two days later to ask Violet for help. She laughed at me and then agreed. I spent most of my free time over the next two weeks at the library with Violet.

The library did not get many visitors so Violet was secretly glad to have my company, although she did her best not to show it. And for me, well the best way I can think to explain it is that Violet filled a hole in my life that I had never realized was there. We shared our first kiss one night when I was helping her close up the library.

Cassie also seemed to take a liking to Violet. Around the same time that we started anglo saxon lessons, Violet actually convinced Cassie to start coming with her on her morning walk along the lakeshore each day. I saw them several times from my campsite on the hill, and while it was hard knowing I was not allowed to go and join them,

seeing Cassie going outside again made me very happy.

This was not the life that I had envisioned for Cassie and I, but everything had worked out far better than I could have hoped. Of course I did think that it was odd that I found those papers written in old english down in the catacombs, and then Cassie just happened to be sent to live with a family that knows anglo saxon; But like an idiot I shrugged it off as a coincidence. Maybe I just wanted things to work out so badly that I was blind to what was right in front of me the whole time.

Because the Millers were now watching Cassie during the day. I had gotten into the habit of napping twice during the day and staying awake to watch over the house for large portions of the night. I fell into this pattern because the last time the cultists came after us it was at night. And I had a feeling that they were not going to give up their quest to get their hands on their master's child.

Of course by this particular night over a month had passed with no sign of the fanatics. Despite only being three months pregnant Cassie looked like she was about to pop any day now. As the inevitable day of delivery drew closer and closer

I was getting nervous. I was worried about the return of Murdock and his thugs, but I was also worried about what the child would be like when it actually came out. Cassie was adamant that she had to keep the child or something bad would happen. I on the other hand had at least one nightmare where the baby was born and it was just a miniature version of it's father.

My thoughts were interrupted as I saw lights out of the corner of my eye. I raised my binoculars and pointed them towards the source. I saw two sets of headlights coming down the narrow dirt road towards the lakehouse. I put down my binoculars and picked up my rifle with the night vision scope. I told myself to stay calm. The Millers might just be having company over, but my instincts said otherwise. It was too late at night for a dinner party or any social event other than a sleepover. So unless a bunch of teenage girls in pajamas came out of those cars I had a feeling things were about to get interesting.

The cars did not drive up to the house. Instead they stopped about fifty yards away from the house and then turned in opposite directions

blocking the road. No car would be able to go to or from the lakehouse.

Yep definitely not a sleepover, I thought to myself.

Ten figures climbed out of the two vehicles. The figure that came out of the front passenger door of the first car was Murdock. He had tracked down Cassie once again, and he wasn't taking any chances this time. He gestured with his arms like he was giving instructions to his men. My guess is that his plan was to approach the lakehouse quietly and surround it on all sides to make sure my sister did not escape again. A good plan to be fair. The only problem of course was that I was at the top of the hill with my rifle.

I took aim at Murdock and fired my first shot. I was aiming for his chest but I hit him in the shoulder instead. As soon as the shot rang out the cultists scattered in confusion. They obviously did not know where the shot had come from, because many of them took cover in places where I had a clear shot at them.

My second shot was at a man who had his back up against a tree. The tree would have provided great cover if I had been firing from the

house and not the hill to his side. It was technically a head shot, but it was really more of a jaw shot. The man went down and crawled away into some bush.

One of the cultists must have seen the flash of my rifle because he started firing his pistol in my general direction. Of course he was firing a pistol at a long range target in the dark, so none of his shots came that close to hitting me. He was taking cover behind one of the cars, but his head and shoulders were clearly visible. I aimed at his head and took a shot. The bullet missed and flew just inches above his right shoulder. He must have felt how close it was though, because he dropped down completely behind the car and did not come back up for another shot.

A couple more cultists tried shooting at me and I returned fire at them. None of our shots landed a hit, and the night went silent again. At this point there was a lull in the fight. The first round was over and I would like to think that I had won it. Two of the cultists were injured and whatever their plan was it had clearly failed before it got started.

I could hear Murdock's voice shouting instructions to his men. I could not make out the

words but my guess was that he was formulating a plan b. I took the opportunity to reload my rifle and move to a better position.

After about two minutes of relative calm the situation heated up once again. Murdock shouted a command and his followers sprang into action. Two of them started to make their way up the hill towards my previous position, and the other six started rushing towards the Miller's house at full sprint.

For the moment I ignored the two men searching for me and focused all of my attention on the group charging the lakehouse. I'm sure you have heard that a moving target is harder to hit, but you have no idea how true that is. I had been practicing regularly for a month. I unloaded my rifle at that group and I only hit one of them. It was a good hit in the center of his back, but I was aiming for his head.

With my rifle empty and five men rapidly approaching the Miller's house I could feel the panic starting to rise up in my chest. I had felt pretty well prepared going into this, but now all my preparation was quickly being overcome by speed and superior numbers.

My fingers were shaking a little as I reloaded my rifle. By the time I was finished, those fanatics were at the front door. The one in the lead gave the door a swift kick, breaking the old lock easily. The door swung partially open and the man took a step over the threshold. There was a loud boom of a shotgun going off and the man took two steps backward before collapsing. The other four took cover realizing that there was someone shooting from the inside.

I assumed that the person shooting from inside the house was Mr. Miller which boosted my morale greatly. Two of the cultists tried to fire through the open doorway without exposing themselves to shotgun fire. A third one went to a nearby window and began firing through it. I fired twice at the man at the window and hit both times.

The remaining three cultists quickly realized they were caught in a crossfire and losing people fast. All three of them rushed into the house and there was a cacophony of gunfire. I heard the shotgun go off twice and at least half a dozen pistol shots. Then things got quiet. For a moment I stayed frozen where I was, unsure of what to do.

I could not see what was happening inside the house, but I had only heard the shotgun go off twice and I was pretty sure that I heard several pistol shots after that. Based on what I had heard I felt it was logical to assume that Mark Miller was dead and at least one cultist was still alive in the house.

Making up my mind I decided to once again ignore the two cultists who were out there looking for me, and I started quickly moving towards the house. I was about a third of the way there when I heard two more pistol shots and a girl scream. It sounded like Violet but it could have been Cassie, I wasn't sure, either way it was a terrible sound.

Throwing caution to the wind I started running towards the house as fast as I could. My left foot caught on a root and I went tumbling down the hill. I knew my ankle was sprained or possibly even broken but I didn't care. I hobbled the rest of the way to the house as fast as I could. By the time I reached the house I had regained enough of my common sense to not go rushing in the front door. I had not seen anyone exit the house, so unless someone had carried Cassie out during the ten

seconds I was rolling down the hill, she was still in there and so were any enemies still alive.

I moved around to the back of the house and discovered that the backdoor was also wide open. For a moment I panicked thinking that perhaps there had been even more cultists who had come at the house from behind. I quickly checked the door and found no signs of forced entry.

My second thought was that one of the fanatics had captured Cassie and taken her out the backdoor, because he knew that I had the front door covered. As soon as this occurred to me I immediately wanted to go back out into the woods and start looking for her. But then I remembered the two shots I heard and the scream that sounded like Violet. I remembered that Mr. Miller's shotgun had gone silent which meant that he was probably dead, but he might be alive and in need of medical attention. For an agonizing moment I stood there trying to decide if I should investigate the house or try to follow whoever fled out the backdoor.

In the end I decided to go back out into the woods. I knew that if there was anyone who needed medical attention inside the house I would

not be able to help them. The only dirt road out of here was blocked so driving them to the hospital was out of the question. And with my injured ankle carrying them to safety was also not an option. I could try to take care of them in the house but that would mean making myself a sitting duck for the two men who were still out there hunting me. Not to mention I barely had any knowledge about first aid.

It was one of the worst decisions I have ever had to make, but I walked away knowing that if there was anyone from the Miller family, inside that house, that needed my help I was abandoning them. The thought that Violet might be inside either dead or dying made me feel sick to my stomach. Each step I took away from the house was more painful than I could have imagined, and not just because of my ankle.

I figured that whoever fled the house would not stay by the lakeshore. It was too open and footprints in the sand would be easy to track. Instead I went into the woods and started looking for signs that may have been left behind. It was still dark at this point and I am not much of a tracker. After about twenty minutes of fruitless searching I was starting to regret my decision to not search the

house. That's when I heard what sounded like a groan of pain nearby.

I immediately stopped and listened for more sounds, but the woods were quiet. Just as I was beginning to wonder if I had imagined it, I heard another groan. I also heard a quieter voice soothing whoever was groaning. I approached the sounds cautiously. They were coming from a small hollow surrounded thickly by trees. I had to get very close before I could see through the tangle of branches.

Inside the hollow I could see Mrs. Miller holding little Arthur. Violet was sitting on the ground looking like she might be in shock, and Cassie was standing bent over with a hand on her belly.

"Cassie!" I said, as I quickly pushed aside branches to get into the hollow.

All four of them jumped in surprise but then relaxed when they saw it was me.

"Tyler you're okay! Thank god! I was so worried when I heard all the gunshots." Cassie said before groaning in pain again.

"What's wrong?" I asked, fearing that I already knew the answer.

"The baby, it's coming."

A Dark Delivery

The tension in the air was so thick you could have cut it with a knife, and yet several hours passed mostly uneventful. Arthur, the seven year old boy with autism that the Millers take care of, stared at me with wide eyes for a long time. It made me feel rather uncomfortable but I didn't want to be rude to the poor kid. Eventually I smiled at him and tried to break the ice.

“Hey, how are you little man?” It was kind of a lame question but I couldn't think of anything better.

Arthur just pointed at the rifle I was holding and said. “Bad thing!”

“Yes Arthur.” Mrs. Miller agreed. “Guns are not toys. They are dangerous and we don’t play with them.” I had a feeling there was some backstory to this exchange that I would rather not know, so I didn’t ask.

At that point I half sat half collapsed on the ground. I grunted in pain and Violet took notice.

“Are you injured?”

“I’m fine, it’s just a sprained ankle.”

“Give me your knife.”

“Why?”

She gave me that don’t argue with me look before repeating herself.

“Give me your knife.”

“Okay.” I said and I pulled out my hunting knife and held it out to her handle first.

She didn’t take it immediately. First she surprised me by taking off her t-shirt, revealing a lot of pale skin and an exercise bra. She took the knife from me and went to work making a long strip of cloth out of the bottom half of her shirt. Once she had finished she put the tattered top half of her shirt back on, and kneeled down on the ground and started wrapping up my sprained ankle.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked.

She looked down and didn't answer at first.

"My dad was the local scout master for a while, he taught me."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up a painful subject."

"Forget about it, it's not your fault he's..."

Violet didn't finish, and she didn't need to. She just went back to wrapping my ankle, and a painful silence fell between us.

I wanted to say something to comfort her, but words have never been my strong suit. And the truth is, I did feel responsible for her father's death. If I had better aim Mr. Miller would probably have survived. I did everything I could think of to prepare for Murdock and his followers to return, but in the end it wasn't enough.

"There, that should be a lot better." Violet said as she tied off the ends of the cloth.

"Thank you."

"It's the least I could do."

By this time the sky had changed from black to dark blue, signalling that dawn was a few hours away. Mrs. Miller had been staying close to Cassie, comforting her and counting contractions. Mrs.

Miller was starting to look worried and she left Cassie's side to come over and talk to me.

"She is progressing very rapidly. At this rate the baby will be born in just a few hours."

"So what do we do, take her to the hospital?"

"At this point I don't think moving her that far is a good idea. Especially when we know that those thugs are out there somewhere."

"Are you suggesting that she have the baby right here in the middle of the woods?"

"Why not? All the other options are even worse."

"Well I certainly don't know how to deliver a baby do you?"

"Actually I do. I have helped out with two births in the past."

"Okay, tell me what you need and I will get it for you."

"Back at the house in the small room next to the kitchen there is a wooden box about this size." She gestured with her arms. "That is my medicine chest. If you could bring that here that would make things a lot easier."

“Alright it will take me about half an hour to go to the house and back.” I said, as I stood up slowly.

I picked up my rifle and handed it to Violet. “Watch over your mom and my sister while I’m gone. If you see anyone that is not me, shoot first and ask questions later.”

Violet looked nervous as she took the gun from me, but she held the rifle correctly and nodded her understanding. I went over to Cassie and knelt beside her.

“I’m gonna be right back okay Cas?”

“I don’t know if I can do this Tyler.”

“Don’t worry, you’re gonna make it through this, and you’re going to be a great mom. I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.” She said, and then another contraction hit and she groaned in pain.

“You better get moving.” Mrs. Miller said, as she rushed to Cassie’s side.

Without another word I left the hollow and started heading back to the house. I had given Violet my rifle so I was now only armed with my shotgun, pistol, and hunting knife. The extra support for my ankle provided by Violet’s first aid

skills made walking a lot easier, but I was still slower than I would have liked to be.

The journey back to the lake house was uneventful. I stayed in the cover of the trees as much as I could and the sky got a little lighter on the way. There were some dark grey storm clouds approaching from the west, and I had a bad feeling that my sister might be forced to give birth in the rain.

Finally I made it to the back door, which was still hanging open like the last time I saw it. I made my way inside, slowly and quietly. The kitchen was close to the backdoor so I could have gone straight for the chest. Instead I decided to take a quick look around first. If the box was as big as Mrs. Miller had said it was I would not be able to use my shotgun while carrying it. So I figured it was best to make sure there were no threats nearby before getting the box.

I made my way towards the front of the house. I passed by the staircase going up to the second floor, and that's where I found the first body. It was one of the cultists laying at the foot of the stairs with two bullet wounds in his chest. I remembered the two shots I had heard in the night,

followed by a scream. I had assumed it was the cultist shooting someone but now I could see that he was the one getting shot.

I wondered who it was who shot him, and then I realized it was probably Cassie. I had given her a pistol to defend herself when I was not around and she must have used it. I felt a strange mixture of pride and concern when I realized this. I remembered the sleepless nights I had when I killed someone for the first time, and I wondered if Cassie was doing okay.

I continued into the living room where I found Mr. Miller's body and the first signs of trouble. There was another body of a cultist, but only one. Where the other two bodies should have been there were two streaks of blood across the floor. Someone or something had taken the bodies.

I moved to the broken window where I had shot a cultist the night before. I looked out the window and sure enough he was gone as well. I looked out across the lakeshore and that's when I saw them.

The best way I can think of to describe them is fish men. Their skin was turquoise and scaly. Their eyes were large and unblinking. They had

webbing between their fingers and toes. There were four of them dragging the bodies of the cultists towards the lake.

When I saw them I just stood there in shock. That was the moment I discovered there was more out there than just the demon under the church. Looking back it should have been obvious. If the Wumpus was real then of course it would not be the only supernatural thing in the world.

There was a sound to my right and I spun to look. There was another fish man coming through the doorway. It must have climbed over the railing of the porch on the other side because I did not see it coming. I thought my days of panic firing my weapons were over, but I was wrong. I shot the thing three times without thinking. The creature let out a scream as it staggered sideways and collapsed on the floor.

I looked out the window to see how the other fish men were reacting to hearing the shots. They had obviously heard the noise and they reacted to it like animals. They abandoned the corpses they had been dragging and scrambled into the lake as fast as they could. Whatever these

things were they were not as tough as the Wumpus, which was a small comfort.

With the fish men gone I appeared to be alone. I made my way back to the kitchen and found the door that Mrs. Miller described. The room was small, it was probably used as a laundry room in the days before washing machines. It was strangely decorated with candles and symbols on the walls. It looked like the room was set up for meditation or something. There were shelves filled with books with strange esoteric titles.

The mystical nature of the room's decoration immediately made me wary. There was a time not so long ago I would have had a good chuckle from seeing someone have room like this in their house. Of course that was before I discovered that demons and fish people were real. The medicine chest was in one of the corners. I grabbed it and quickly left the room.

This trip had been filled with troubling revelations but I did not have time to think through any of them. I had already been gone longer than planned and I still needed to make it all the way back to the hollow carrying this heavy chest.

Thanks to my sprained ankle I had already been slow on the journey to the lakehouse. Now with a heavy wooden box in my arms I was moving painfully slow. I also could not hold my shotgun at the ready so I felt vulnerable to attack. It began to rain on my way back to the hollow. At first it was just a light sprinkle, but by the time I made it back to the hollow it was pouring.

When I got within fifty feet of the hollow I heard Cassie scream. I half stumbled half ran the rest of the way. I pushed through the tree branches and burst into the clearing. There were no bad guys or monsters, just Cassie kneeling in the center of the hollow. Her face was contorted in pain, and wet with tears and sweat. Mrs. Miller and Violet were standing on either side of her holding her steady. Little Arthur was standing off to the side watching with a mixture of fascination and horror on his face.

“It’s about time you got here, she’s fully dilated already.” Mrs. Miller said, as she walked over to me and snatched the medicine chest out of my hands.

She opened up the chest revealing rows of glass vials and pouches tied with string. There was not a single thing in there that looked like you could

buy it at a pharmacy. She took one of the vials, uncorked it and held it up to Cassie's lips.

"This will help with the pain." She said, and without hesitation Cassie drank the whole thing down.

"Tyler get over here and hold your sister's hand, I'm going to catch the baby when it comes out."

I did as I was instructed. My heart was beginning to pound. This was something I had not prepared for. I should have done some reading about child birth during my free time.

I have heard people say that childbirth while painful for the mother is a wonderful thing to watch. It's the miracle of life playing out before your eyes. However now that I have actually seen a birth for myself, I'm going to have to call bullshit on that one. Maybe it is a wonderful experience when you are in a dry clean hospital or birthing center. But watching a child be born in the woods, in the pouring rain, is a terrible thing to witness. It made me shudder to think of the millions or perhaps even billions of women in history who had to give birth in similar conditions, just so the human race could survive another generation.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, or perhaps it was some supernatural force at work, but I did notice that as the labor progressed the weather began to get worse and worse. It started with the rain and then there was a heavy wind. A bolt of lightning struck somewhere towards Amberley Grove, and there was a boom of thunder almost immediately.

Cassie squeezed my hand hard, and dug her fingernails into my flesh, as she pushed with another contraction. The wind blew even harder as leaves and branches started to come off of the trees. Down in the hollow we were mostly protected from the flying debris. I did have one branch hit me in the back of the head. For a moment it was like standing in a hurricane. The wind became so loud that I actually couldn't hear Cassie scream anymore, even though I was standing right next to her.

Then suddenly it was all over, the delivery and the storm. The sky was still filled with dark clouds and the rain was still coming down gently. But the hurricane winds and the thunder and lightning stopped almost at the same time. Mrs. Miller had the child in her arms, she cleaned it off a

bit and she handed it to Cassie. The baby was covered in blood and other gross stuff. It did look like a baby however, which was a great relief to me considering what the child's father looked like.

"It's a boy." Mrs. Miller said when she gave the child to Cassie.

It's hard to say what Cassie's first impressions of her child were. She looked relieved that the whole ordeal was over. I think she was also relieved that the child looked fairly normal. Of course neither one of us had ever seen a newborn baby before. We did not exactly know what normal was, but the fact that Mrs. Miller who had been to multiple births did not even blink at the child's appearance was a relief.

The boy had a full head of black hair, a small nose, and a big mouth. The most unsettling thing about the child were his eyes. He had yellow eyes like his father. I found myself hoping that old saying about eyes being the window to the soul was not true.

"Normally they use a clamp to pinch the umbilical cord shut, but we will have to improvise." Mrs. Miller said. She took one of the pouches from her medical chest and removed the string holding it

shut. She tied the string around the umbilical cord near the baby's belly button.

"Can I borrow your knife?" She asked. I gave her my hunting knife and she used it to sever the umbilical cord now that it was tied off.

During all of this little Arthur had kept his distance and not made a sound. Now that the birth was over and the storm was calming, he took a few cautious steps towards us.

"Do you want to see the baby Arthur?" Violet asked. She walked over to him and took his hand.

"Come on let's go see the baby." She said as she led him over to where Cassie was holding the boy.

Arthur got very close, and he took a long look at the child. He looked confused and afraid. He raised his hand, pointed a finger at the baby, and said just two words.

"Bad thing!"

He ran away from Cassie and the baby. He grabbed onto Violet's legs and buried his face in her belly. Violet was surprised by this and she put a comforting hand on the back of his head.

“No, no Arthur. It’s not a bad thing it’s a baby.” She explained.

Arthur just shook his head and kept shouting. “Bad thing! Bad thing! Bad thing!”

The Price She Had To Pay

I awoke from a bad dream into a nightmare. Mrs. Miller gave me something for my sprained ankle. It must have knocked me out because that was the deepest sleep I had gotten in weeks. Although I had slept deeply I did not sleep peacefully. I had dreamed that Cassie and Murdock were fighting over the child. Pulling him back and forth in a tug of war. The baby screamed in pain

and Cassie cried. Murdock laughed at the cruelty he was causing.

That's when I woke up and discovered that Cassie, the baby and Mrs. Miller were all missing. There was only myself, Violet and little Arthur in the hollow. Violet and Arthur were fast asleep. I got up and searched the area surrounding the hollow looking for any sign of Cassie and Mrs. Miller. At first I was worried that the cultists had found us while I was sleeping and took Cassie and the baby. But I quickly realized that was probably not the case. Considering how many cultists I had killed there was no way they came across me napping and chose not to kill me in my sleep.

As I was standing there wondering what could be going on, all of the puzzle pieces that I had been ignoring came together in my mind. The strange papers I found in the catacombs. They were written in Anglo Saxon a language that Mrs. Miller was fluent in. The strange room in the lakehouse that I had assumed was for meditation. Now that I thought about it, that room's decorations bore some similarities to the ritual room in the catacombs. Last and most damning of all, Murdock said he could help make sure that I received

guardianship over Cassie. If he had the power to do that, he probably also had the power to choose which foster home Cassie was sent to.

Mrs. Miller was a member of the cult. I did not want to believe it, but what other explanation could there be? Why would she abandon her adopted daughter and a little boy with autism in the woods, unless she was a fanatic like the others. The more I thought about it the more sense it made. Her husband had died less than twenty four hours earlier and yet I had not seen her shed a single tear. When the child was born with yellow eyes she did not even blink.

There was no denying it, she had fooled Cassie and I completely, and now my sister and the demon baby were on their way back to Stillwater, where Murdock would be waiting for them. I was furious. I was scared. I didn't know what to do but I knew I had to do something. I went back to the hollow to grab my stuff and that's when I saw Violet sleeping peacefully.

I drew my pistol and I got on top of her so that she was pinned to the ground. I smacked her in the face and she woke up. She looked around

confused and then saw the pistol I was pointing at her face.

“Tyler what the hell are you doing?”

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“Your mother is one of them. Did you know?”

“You’re not making any sense Tyler.”

I smacked her even harder.

“Ow! What the hell Tyler?”

“Your mother is gone and so are Cassie and the baby, she’s probably taking them back to Murdock right now. Did you know this was going to happen?”

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

I smacked her again.

“You’re not stupid Violet. Do you really expect me to believe that you had no idea what the room next to the kitchen was used for?”

“Mom uses it for making elixirs and things. I knew she was into witchcraft but I always thought it was a bunch of nonsense.”

“When I showed you that paper written in anglo saxon did you know your mother had written it?”

“No I didn’t.”

I smacked her so hard it left a mark.

“Okay, okay, yes I knew my mom wrote it. I didn’t tell you because I thought that telling you my mom’s a witch would scare you away.”

“If that’s the reason, you lied then. Why did you lie just now?”

“Because I knew you would be angry for not telling you before.”

“Do you know where I found that paper?”

“I have no idea.”

I cocked my pistol and put it right up against her forehead.

“I swear! I swear I have no idea where you got it from!”

“Why should I believe you? You’ve already admitted to lying to me twice.”

“Please! Please, Tyler! I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know who those men were. I don’t know why they killed my dad. I don’t know why my mom and your sister are gone. I don’t know! I swear I don’t know!” Tears were streaming down Violet’s face as she pleaded with me.

I was very conflicted inside. On the one hand she seemed sincere. But I had been fooled by

her mother and I was not about to make that mistake again. For at least a minute I just sat there holding my pistol to her forehead watching her cry. Finally I came to a decision. I pulled my gun away from her head and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Here’s what we are going to do.” I said.

“We are going to get my sister back. You are going to follow my instructions exactly. If you try to run, pull a fast one on me, or even disobey one of my orders just a little bit. I will kill you, no warnings, no second chances. Do you understand?”

Violet nodded in agreement. I got off of her and went to my bag, never taking my eyes off of her the whole way there. After a while of feeling around inside, I found a large zip tie and tossed it at her feet.

“Bind your hands with that. Use your teeth to tighten it.”

Violet did as she was told. She was clearly confused and upset by the situation and I can’t say that I blame her.

“Do you have your phone?”

“No I left it at the house when we ran away.”

“Do you know your mom’s phone number?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know if she had her phone when all of you came here.”

“I don’t know. If she had her phone why wouldn’t she call for help?”

“Because then she would not have been able to kidnap my sister.”

“If you say so.”

Violet clearly did not believe that her mom had taken Cassie against her will. She was humoring me, because I had a gun and she probably thought I was crazy. If what she said was true then she had not seen the horrible things I had. My behaviour must have seemed like the ravings of a mad man. I honestly didn’t care what she thought, all I cared about was saving Cassie.

It took Violet, Arthur and I about an hour to hike back to where my car was parked. I assumed that Mrs. Miller knew my phone number and would not answer if I called, so I drove us to The Amberley Grove Public Library and had Violet call her from the phone there. I told Violet to put it on speaker phone so I could hear the conversation. The phone rang three times before Mrs. Miller answered.

“Hello.”

“Mom where are you?”

“Oh Violet it’s so good to hear your voice. I’m sorry that I left without saying anything. The baby was not feeling well so Cassie and I had to take it to the hospital.”

“Why didn’t you take us with you?”

“Oh you and Arthur have been through so much I didn’t want to wake you. Besides I knew you would be safe with Tyler.”

“You could have left us a note. Why didn’t you leave a note?”

“I didn’t have a pen and paper on me. Besides it was an emergency.”

Violet glanced at me. I could see in her eyes that she did not believe this story either. I could also see that she was worried, worried that I might be right about her mother, worried that I might not be crazy.

“Is the baby okay?”

“The baby is fine, he’s sleeping now.”

“How’s Cassie?”

“She’s fine, she’s also sleeping. She’s had quite the ordeal the past twelve hours.”

“I would like to speak to my sister.” I said, interrupting the conversation.

“Tyler, you there too. I’m glad. But like I told you, your sister is getting some much needed rest.”

“I don’t care, wake her up.”

“I’m not going to do that Tyler. Cassie needs her sleep.”

I cocked my pistol close to the phone, so that Mrs. Miller could hear it, and then I pointed it at Violet’s head.

“If I don’t hear my sister’s voice in one minute, I’m going to paint the walls with your daughter’s brains.”

There was a long pause and then I heard Mrs. Miller let out a sigh of resignation.

“I guess this is where charade ends. Have it your way Tyler. You want to talk to your sister, well here she is.”

There was another long pause followed by rapid heavy breathing.

“Tyler? Tyler is that you?”

“I’m here Cas. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, but they took my baby!”

“It’s going to be okay Cas. I’m going to come get you.”

“Oh really and how exactly do you plan on doing that?” Mrs. Miller interjected.

“Well we each have something that the other wants so how about a little hostage exchange.”

“You expect me to betray the order?”

“For your daughter, yes I think you will. If I had to guess, I would say you have already disobeyed a direct order by letting me talk to Cassie. You didn’t shed a tear when they killed your husband. You didn’t love him, but you do love your daughter, am I right?”

There was another long pause before she answered.

“Yes, yes I do love her.”

“Good. There’s an old abandoned hotel in Stillwater called The Lakeside Hotel. Meet us there tonight at nine. Bring Cassie with you and we will make the exchange there.”

“Fine, I’ll be there.”

“And one more thing. Don’t bring anyone else or I’ll kill Violet.”

Mrs. Miller did not reply. Instead I heard her talking to Cassie.

“You must be so proud of your brother. Being so willing to kill other girls for you.”

“You know Mrs. Miller. People who live in glass lakehouses shouldn’t throw stones.”

“I’ve never killed anyone Tyler. Can you say the same?”

“No you just lead them into a maze to be eaten by a demon. Because that’s so much better.”

“Please save some of your sarcasm for tonight.”

“Oh I will.” I said, and then I hung up the phone.

Violet looked like she might be sick.

“Do you believe me now?”

She nodded.

“I still don’t understand what is going on, but she just came right out and admitted that everything she told me was a lie.”

“So do you want to help me get my sister back?”

Violet hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

“It’s been far, far too long since I was able to trust anyone. But I’m going to take a huge leap of faith and trust you.” I said, and I took out my hunting knife and cut the zip tie off of her wrists.

She rubbed her wrists and then looked at me curiously.

“Why are you doing this? I mean, if those men that came to the house were after your sister, and now they have her, why not just report it to the police? No one would call you a bad brother for letting the professionals handle it. No one would blame you if you walked away.”

“Maybe that’s true, but I would blame myself. I promised Cassie a long time ago, when we were both little, that if she was ever in trouble I would help her. If she was ever in danger I would protect her, and if she was ever lost I would find her. Now that may have just been a silly promise between two kids, but I have never broken that promise, and I never want to.”

“You know. I’ve spent most of my life glad that I never had a brother. Saved me a lot teasing and fighting over stupid things. But listening to you, it almost makes me wish I had a brother.”

“Almost?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Almost.” She said and she leaned in and gave me a quick kiss.

“Come on let’s go get your sister.”

I spent most of the drive back to Stillwater telling Violet stories about the past few months, and all the crazy stuff that had happened to Cassie and I. She expressed her disbelief several times, and at one point I even pulled over so that I could show her the new scars on the back of my right leg. After she saw that she asked if she could see the papers that I found in the ritual room. She spent the rest of the drive examining those papers as I continued telling my stories. In the end she said that she believed me, despite how impossible my tale sounded.

We arrived in Stillwater well before the meeting, which gave us plenty of time to come up with a plan and prepare to enact it. One of our most important preparations was finding a sweet old lady to babysit Arthur for a couple days. We knew there was a high probability of this hostage exchange going wrong, so bringing a seven year old kid along for the ride seemed like a bad idea.

I pulled into the parking lot at The Lakeside Hotel a few minutes before nine. I got out of the car and I stood with my back towards the lake.

I was alone, but I only had to wait a couple of minutes before I had company. Mrs. Miller's car

drove into the parking lot and parked as far away from me as possible. I stayed where I was and watched as Mrs. Miller got out of the car, walked to the trunk, opened it up and pulled Cassie out of the back. I stayed exactly where I was as I waited for the two of them to come over. Cassie looked unharmed. Her hands were tied with rope and there was a gag in her mouth to stop her from speaking. Mrs. Miller was holding a knife to her throat and did not look pleased when she saw that I was alone.

“Where’s my daughter?”

“She’s not far. She would have come but unfortunately she’s all tied up at the moment.”

“I want to see her.”

“I know you do, which is why you’re going to let my sister go and then I’ll tell you where she is.”

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“Hey I told you to bring Cassie. You never told me to bring Violet.”

“Tell me where my daughter is or say goodbye to your sister.” She said and she brought the knife even closer to Cassie’s neck. I rolled my eyes to show my lack of worry.

“You can stop pretending that you might kill her. I know you won’t.”

“Oh really and why is that?”

“Because you need her to make more demon babies.” Mrs. Miller did not reply, which confirmed my suspicions.

“Those shackles down in the catacombs were old. How many girls did you have to go through? Dozens, hundreds, thousands?” Once again Mrs. Miller was silent.

“Okay, just answer me one question. Why Cassie? Why was she able to have the kid when all the others could not? What makes her so special?” I was not really expecting a direct answer so I was surprised when I got one.

“The master likes to speak in riddles. It is not always easy to understand his meaning. For over half a century the order has tried and failed to find him a suitable bride. I can communicate with him through rituals. I have asked many times what a girl requires to be worthy of him and the answer is always the same, royal blood.”

“Royal blood, so my sister is distantly related to a king or something?”

“No we have tried that before, and the master found the girl unworthy. This royal blood is something different. I’m not sure what it is but your

sister is the first one we have found who has it. She's special." As she said that last part Mrs. Miller stroked Cassie's hair with her free hand and gave my sister a very creepy look.

"Well this has been a fascinating conversation, but I'm afraid I can't let my sister be dragged back to that thing." I said as I drew my pistol.

"Foolish human, do you think you can steal from a god without facing the consequences?" Mrs. Miller asked as she raised her free hand high above her head.

It must have been some kind of signal because the door of the old hotel burst open and three men with guns came rushing out. I fired at one of them and the shot hit him in the gut. He grabbed at his belly, stumbled, and fell face first on the ground. The other two fired at me and one of them hit me in the chest. The force of the impact made me take a step back and my second shot flew wide, missing the remaining two cultists.

There was a crack of rifle fire as one of the cultists was shot in the back. He collapsed on the ground and the final fanatic looked around wildly wondering where the rifle shot had come from. I

shot him twice while he was distracted. The man I shot first took one more shot at me, while he was bleeding out on the ground, and he hit me in a spot similar to where I hit him. I grunted in pain and then shot him in the face.

The gun battle lasted less than a minute and I was still standing. Mrs. Miller was staring at me in disbelief.

“How are you still alive?”

“There’s this really neat invention called a bulletproof vest. I picked one up on the way here. Your cult should really think about investing in some.”

“I am sick of you, and your sarcasm.”

“You told me to save some for tonight. All jokes aside though I’m going to have some really nasty bruises tomorrow.”

“If you’re going to kill me I suggest you do it now.”

“I don’t want to kill you. Just let my sister go and you can be on your merry way.”

“Your overconfidence will be your undoing. You think you have won? We still have the child and he will help us free the master. When he is finally free he will find you and devour you.”

“Well until then how about you take your filthy hands off of my sister.”

Mrs. Miller did take her hands off my sister, but only once she was charging me with her knife. I guess she couldn't give up the master's bride without a fight. The suddenness of the attack took me by surprise. I took a couple steps backward as I tried to take a shot at her. She covered the distance between us too quickly. She knocked my pistol aside with her free hand and lunged at my face with the knife. She stabbed me in the cheek barely missing my eye.

Her momentum carried her into me, I probably could have stayed on my feet if I didn't have a sprained ankle. I hit the ground hard and Mrs. Miller was on me before I could get up. She pulled back her dagger, preparing to stab me in the face again. I tried to push her off, but I couldn't manage it. The knife came plunging towards my face and I tried to move my head out of the way as much as I could. There was a loud crack of a rifle going off as the knife ripped through my left ear.

There was a look of confusion on Mrs. Miller's face. She tried to say something, but she sputtered and blood came dripping out of her

mouth onto my face. I pushed her off of me and she collapsed on the ground coughing up blood. Once she finished coughing she managed to say a few words.

“I failed you master, please forgive me.”

About ten seconds later she stopped moving. Slowly I got back on my feet. I went over to Cassie and removed the gag from her mouth.

“Are you alright?” I asked, as I started cutting through the ropes with my knife.

“Am I okay? Are you okay? You just got shot twice and had your face cut up!”

“I’ll be fine in a few days. I’m glad you’re safe now.”

“They took my baby Tyler. We have to get him back before they use him to free that monster.”

“We’ll get him back Cas, but first I am going to need some pain medication and long nap before I go do anymore crazy or stupid things.”

Cassie let out a weak laugh at my joke.

“Tyler, after we find my baby do you think three of us could go someplace very far away from here and have a fresh start?”

“That sounds like a great idea to me. How about somewhere across the Atlantic like England or Ireland?”

“That’s fine by me but how would we get there without social services catching us?”

“We could bribe someone to take us across the ocean in a boat.” I joked.

We shared a good laugh together. It felt good to laugh. It had been such a long time that my own laugh sounded a little bit strange to me.

The happy moment was cut short however when we saw Violet slowly walking towards us. She was holding my rifle with shaking hands as her eyes were fixed on her mother’s body. She kept walking until she was right next to it. She sank down to her knees and let the rifle fall out of her grasp.

Cassie and I said nothing. We just stood there in respectful silence. She reached out with a trembling hand and closed her mother’s eyes. She withdrew her hand and continued to stare at the body. That’s when the tears came. Silently at first, then with gentle sobs, and then finally with distraught wailing.

I wanted to say or do something to help her, but I knew there was nothing I could do. She made her choice, now this was the price she had to pay.

When All Hope Fades

“Will you help me bury her?” Violet asked.

“Of course, where do you want to take her?”

I answered.

“I want to take her back to Amberley Grove and bury her in the woods.”

“What? We don’t have time for that. Those people still have my baby!” Cassie protested.

“I just killed my mother to save you and your brother. The absolute least you can do is help me bury her.”

“I’m grateful for what you did, and I’m sorry about your mother, but every minute we waste those lunatics are getting closer to enacting their plan.”

“I understand Cassie, but we don’t know where they have taken the boy.” I said. “I have a sprained ankle, probably a cracked rib, and my face is all cut up. Violet just did something that no one should be forced to do. The three of us have not eaten in the past two days and we have barely had any sleep. I promise you we will find your son, but it’s not going to happen today.”

Cassie was clearly not happy, but she knew I was right. Her shoulders sagged and she sighed in resignation.

“Fine we’ll do this your way.” She said.

I searched Mrs. Miller’s body for the keys to her car and found them in her pocket.

“Alright if you girls grab her legs I will grab her by the armpits and we can put her in the car.” I said.

We moved Mrs. Miller to her car with some difficulty. We put her in the back and I volunteered to be the one that would drive the car with a body in it. I gave Violet the keys to my car and Cassie reluctantly decided to ride with her. I was slightly worried that the two of them might get into a fight on the way back to Amberley Grove; but compared to my other problem of how the heck was I going to rescue a demon baby from a violent cult, it seemed like a minor problem.

I made sure to be on my best driving behaviour all the way back to Amberley Grove. The last thing I wanted was a cop to pull me over with a dead body in the back. The trip was uneventful, I followed Violet who was driving my car because she was the one who would be choosing her mother's burial place. She eventually turned onto a back road which led deep into the woods. The dirt road eventually ended at a small parking area with an outhouse and a hiking trail.

We carried the body into the woods, until we could no longer see the parking lot or be seen by anyone who might come along. I had a small shovel that was part of my camping supplies. At first I tried to dig the grave all by myself but my

sprained ankle and cracked rib had other plans. In the end the three of us took turns digging with the shovel. The grave ended up being pretty shallow because we were in a hurry. I found a large rock and used it to mark where the grave was.

“Do you want to say a few words?” I asked Violet.

She shook her head and said. “I’ll come back one day when I find the words I want to say.”

We went back to the cars and we talked about what we should do next. After a while we agreed to get some food, check into a hotel to get some rest and make a plan.

What hotel was that?

I... I can’t tell you.

Continue then...

We bought some pizza and checked into the hotel room. We ate the pizza without much conversation. I tried thinking of a way to break the ice without coming off as extremely callous but I couldn’t come up with anything. After the pizza was gone Cassie went to sleep on one of the two beds. Violet and I went into the bathroom and she helped patch me up.

“Thank you for agreeing to help with my mother.” She said as she closed the cut on my cheek with surgical tape.

“I took a huge risk by trusting you and you didn’t let me down. I wasn’t going to refuse to help you after that.”

“Yeah that would have been a real douchebag thing to do.”

“Have you thought about what you are going to do now?”

“I don’t know. I suppose the lakehouse belongs to me now, but I don’t really want to go live there alone.”

“You can stay with us if you want. At least until you figure out what you want to do.”

“Take off your shirt.”

“What?”

“I need to check where you were shot.”

“Oh right, one second.”

I pulled off my shirt and Violet began to examine the two giant bruises that were starting to form on my chest and gut. She poked the nastier looking of the two and a jolt of pain made me pull away instinctively.

“Does that hurt?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Yep the rib is definitely bruised if not broken. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about that. Unless you want to go to a hospital you will just have to wait for your body to heal naturally.”

“How long will that take.”

“It’s hard to say, a few weeks, or a few months maybe.”

“Well aren’t you just full of good news.”

“Hey at least the vest stopped the bullet from going through the bottom of your lung.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You mean your offer to stay with you and Cassie. Well considering that the two of you are literally the only people who know what I’ve been through the last few days, that’s a very tempting offer. But what am I supposed to do about Arthur?”

“Well if you’re thinking about trying to take over caring for him, let me tell you from experience that’s easier said than done.”

“That’s not what I had in mind. He needs a new home with people more serious and responsible than me to take care of him. I could take him to social services but they would ask a lot of questions that I can’t answer”

“This is going to sound really bad, but the easiest solution is to just not go back for him. That old lady will take him to social services and they will find him a new home.”

“I hate that idea, but I can’t think of a better one.”

“I’ve been saying that to myself a lot the past three months.”

“That sounds like a terrible way to live life.”

“It is, but at least I’m still living.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, and that’s when we started to make out. It didn’t last very long, two minutes at most. Then Violet broke away from the kissing.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this. Not after everything that happened today. My mind is trying to process too many things”

“No, you’re right. I’m injured, my sister is asleep in the other room. This is the wrong place and the wrong time.”

“To be continued?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

We went back into the bedroom. I offered to sleep on the floor but Violet would not hear it. I was secretly glad that she insisted I take the bed,

because I had never been so tired and sore in my life. Despite my injuries and my worries I slept like a baby, which shows just how tired I was.

Violet and Cassie were already awake when I woke up, so we immediately started to put together a plan. We figured that the two most likely places that Cassie's child might be were in the catacombs or with Murdock. Since none of us were in a hurry to go back to the catacombs we chose to investigate the later option first. Cassie wanted to come but I put my foot down. She had just given birth and I did not want her anywhere near danger until she had a chance to recover. So Violet and I went to hunt down Murdock.

I was surprised by how easy it was to track him down. I thought the leader of a cult would be a bit more secretive. All it took was one bribe to a fat man at the front desk of the city records office to get all the details we could want. The addresses of his house and office. The make, model and year of both his cars; as well as their license plate numbers. His phone number and email address. We even got the juicy details about his divorce five years ago.

We decided that the best plan of action was to search his house during his office hours. Because the house was in the middle of a residential neighbourhood we decided not to take the rifle and shotgun. I had my pistol and hunting knife, and Violet had a pistol that we took off the cultist that gave me a cracked rib.

We parked the car about a block away from the house and walked the rest of the way there. We gave the house a once over and could not see any cameras or other obvious security measures. I guess that makes sense, after all if you are doing illegal stuff the last thing you want is a security company to accidentally get evidence of it.

The windows were locked but also old so it was not that difficult to force one of them open. Violet and I quickly climbed into the house. We entered through the bathroom and began our search of the house. I was surprised by how normal it was. I figured there would be a ritual room, like in the Miller's house, or a library filled with strange tomes of forbidden knowledge. But no it was just a normal house filled with normal things. We searched the ground floor first, then the upstairs.

We found the stairs to the basement near the kitchen.

“Well maybe he keeps all the crazy stuff downstairs.” I said.

“Makes sense. I mean if I was going to kidnap someone and keep them in my house. I would probably go with the basement.” Violet said jokingly.

The stairs creaked worse than a grandpa’s knee which made me nervous. If there was anyone downstairs there was a good chance they could hear us coming down. I came down first and I found the light switch. Only one of the lights in the hallway worked so it was dimly lit, but at least it was better than being in the dark.

We started searching the basement, and once again everything seemed pretty normal. There was another bedroom, a bathroom and what appeared to be some kind of downstairs sitting room.

“Do you think this house may be some kind of a decoy or something?” I wondered out loud.

“Maybe he has another place where he does all of his culty stuff. Some place that he

doesn't own directly, so that people can't do what we are doing right now." Violet guessed.

I started kicking myself mentally. Of course it wasn't going to be that easy. Murdock was clever, clever enough to live two lives at once and keep one of them a complete secret.

"Well I guess we should get out of here, and get back to the drawing board to come up with a new plan." I said.

"Wait I think there is one more room over here." Violet said as she pulled back some big curtains that I thought were just covering up a basement window. There was an old wooden door behind the curtains. There was nothing remarkable about it except that it was rather ugly and someone had gone to the trouble of covering it up.

"Now we're getting somewhere." Violet said as she tried the doorknob.

The door was locked but it made a little bit of noise when Violet tried to open it. That's when we heard it. The muffled sound of a baby crying.

"Oh my gosh he's here." Violet said in surprise.

“Out of the way.” I said to Violet, and she just barely stepped aside before I kicked open the door.

The room was dark, and I was not about to go looking for light switches at a time like this, so I pulled out my flashlight and charged into the room. It appeared to be some kind of storage room. There were lots of shelves filled with cardboard boxes and plastic bins. The crying was louder now, but I could see no sign of the baby.

“Over here!” Violet said as she started moving down an aisle between two rows of shelves. I followed her and the crying got louder and louder. Finally it reached a point where the crying was so loud the baby had to be right there next to us, but we still couldn’t see him.

“I don’t understand, where is he?” I asked out loud.

“It doesn’t make any sense.” Violet said, the panic was starting to rise in her voice.

That’s when I saw it. On a nearby shelf there was an old tape recorder that was partially taken apart, it had wires running from it down along the shelf. Those wires had to be going to some kind of trigger by the door.

“Violet we have to get out of here now!” I shouted.

“Uh Tyler, what the hell is that?” Violet said as she raised her finger to point at something on a different shelf. It was an ordinary screwdriver, well ordinary apart from the fact that it was shaking violently for no apparent reason.

Less than two seconds after I noticed the screwdriver it flew off of the shelf without warning. There was no time for me to react. Violet took a half step backwards and then fell into my arms. The screwdriver was stuck in her neck and she was struggling to breath.

“I think... We’ve been played Tyler.” She managed to say.

I stood there in shock, holding her in my arms. I knew enough about first aid to know that removing the screwdriver would be a very bad idea. I had to get her out of there. I had to get her to a hospital right away. That’s when something very heavy slid off of a shelf above me and came crashing down on my head.

Then I woke up here. Wherever here is. I had a headache so bad that a mountain of pain medication would not be able to relieve it, and I was

... tied to this chair. I was not alone when I woke up there was a man in the room watching me. It was the cultist that I shot in the jaw on the night before Cassie gave birth. Turns out his name is Hugo and he really hates me. I can't say that I blame him since I ruined his good looks, but I really did not enjoy the way he expressed his hatred.

Then you came into the room and told him to stop beating me. He didn't want to stop, but he did as he was told like a good dog. You sent him away and that's when you started asking me questions and feeding me that sweet stuff.

There I told you the whole story. Can I have some more please?

Of course you can, just as soon as you tell me where your sister is.

I... I can't tell you that.

Why not?

Because you'll tell your father where she is.

I won't tell him. I promise it will be our little secret.

I wish I could believe you.

Why don't you believe me?

Because you're the reason Cassie and I are in this whole mess to begin with. Why did you do it

Christine? Why did you lead Cassie and the other girls down there?

Do you love your sister Tyler?

Yes.

Would you be willing to do anything for her?

Almost anything, yes.

Well my father feels the same way about me.

And I feel the same way about him. We're just like you and Cassie. We are not evil. All the choices we have made have not been out of hatred but out of love.

I... I don't know what to think anymore.

Well let me tell you what to think then. I love

Cassie just as much as you do. I want what's best for her. She is a princess and she deserves to be a queen. All you have to do is tell me where she is, and soon she will be the most powerful and important woman in the world. Don't you want that for her?

I don't know.

Yes you do. I can see it in your eyes. Just tell me where she is and she will never be in danger ever again.

Okay she's... She's in room number five of The Lucky Seven Motel in Amberley Grove.

Good boy. I knew you would come around once I explained everything to you. Get some rest now, and don't worry, you'll be reunited with your sister soon.

To Be Continued...

Thank you for reading my short stories. The next volume will be coming soon. If you would like to support my work please consider leaving a review and sharing these free stories with your friends. If you would like to support me financially go to

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About Me

I started writing when I was eleven years old, shortly after I was diagnosed with Osteosarcoma (bone cancer). During this time when I spent nearly every minute of every day in a hospital bed, writing was my escape. It was my path to freedom. Since then I have written three books as well as several poems, essays, and short stories. I became a published author at the age of seventeen and was awarded the Susan Sherlock Award for teenage writers. In the past, I have worked as a teacher and a volunteer for several nonprofit organizations. I am currently working on a continuing series of short stories called The Disturbing Tales of Tyler West. I live in Idaho with my wife and two daughters.

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