

The Curse of Groveford

Demetrius J. Edwards

© 2012, Demetrius J. Edwards

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

This is a legally distributed free edition from www.obooko.com
You are licensed to download this digital copy strictly for your personal use only: it must not be redistributed or offered for sale in any form.

For the source of my motivation.

I.

Welcome To Grovesford The bitter atmosphere rivaled their cheerful spirits, and the skies were heavy and dismal. It had been raining for days now, and by the looks of things, it was only the beginning. It was a frightening situation when lightening storms seemed to endlessly carry on. Frankly, they weren't too worried about the weather or anything else. All they were focused on was the fact that, shortly, they would be entering the pathway into the rest of their lives, whether for better, or for worse.

Jon Williams, the proud father of three children, husband to a wonderful wife, and owner of a small business, gazed onward into the ageless rainstorm as he drove his family towards their new home, here in good ol' Grovesford, Alabama. Jon had been hoping to move away from their previous home in Miami for some time now, but it wasn't until recently that he and his wife had agreed on a place to stay. As a matter of fact, the sudden decision had been made just this very morning, while Jon was in the middle of a small business meeting. Jon still had on his white collar work shirt and black slacks from the meeting, yet he didn't seem a bit bushed from working. Jon took a quick glimpse at himself in the rear-view mirror propped on the windshield, acknowledging his physical "simplicity", from his average Joe close cropped black hair, to his pearly whites. He then noticed his twelve-year old son, Jeremy, smiling at him from the backseat. Jon hurriedly returned the smile and focused his attention on driving.

Jeremy could only smile at how zany his dad acted sometimes. He acknowledged that his father was almost an exact, yet older, mirror image of himself. It wasn't that he didn't want to be like his dad when he was older, it was just the fact that his dad wasn't like most other adults. Jeremy's dad was the carefree type. Never focusing on one problem, but always trying to keep things simple. Jeremy acted very similarly to his father, yet with a bit more energy and optimism. He was twelve after all. However, even at an age where he was on the verge of teen hood, Jeremy possessed physical qualities eerily similar to that of his fathers. There were even those rare occasions where Jeremy would have to actually try and act differently, only to later discover that he couldn't be happier with being the son of a goof.

Sitting to the far right of Jeremy was his all too annoying fifteen year old know-it-all sister, Rebecca. Rebecca was the exact reason that Jeremy had decided to never attempt to understand the inner workings of the female mind. It was an impossible task. Obviously Rebecca didn't think she was stuck up in any way. She actually figured that she was the gift to the family, even though they now had a six-month old infant brother. In all seriousness, Rebecca was good at heart, and foul (occasionally) outwardly. She was indeed soaring on attractiveness from her long, brunette colored hair, to her charming smile; however, she was low on more significant attributes.

In between the two rivaling siblings, was a sleeping baby boy named Jacob. While there isn't much to say about an infant, one thing should be noted about Jacob, and that is that he seems to be the most "civil" of the lot. Sanity comes in tiny, sleeping packages according to the grapevine.

Last, but not least, excluding the fact that the William's family owned a medium sized black Labrador retriever, was Carolyn, the wife and mother. Carolyn was a stay at home mom that decided that since the family now consisted of three children, she should be the one to stay home and eliminate the need for

babysitters and daycare's and such. Her "genius" plan had worked out well ever since Jacob was forced into the world. Carolyn certainly wasn't the type of woman to overuse makeup, yet she did tend to sport a fancy for beauty and hair and whatnot, only applying minimal amounts of makeup to her already dazzling face. Jeremy indeed loved his mother, however he could only hope and pray that Rebecca would turn out like her, in view of the fact that she certainly looked like her. Information like that, however, he kept to himself. He was just grateful that his mother was a good woman.

As the family traveled along, the weather only seemed to worsen. The skies grew gradually darker, and the cold air stung profoundly, even though all of the windows on the minivan were tightly sealed. Jeremy, having had enough of hearing the storms effusions, opened his mouth to say something only to be immediately silenced by a loud clap of commanding thunder. He contemplated reattempting his previous effort, only to come to his senses and decided against it. He gazed out into the gray gloom past the wet, and somewhat foggy window and wondered to himself how he would adjust to 'home' if this was how it would be for the (insert number here) years to follow. His mood was demoralized suddenly, and he decided to just try and go to sleep.

As a matter of fact, everyone in the car seemed to be trying to place their minds at ease, however, that was much simpler said than done. As Jon began to allow his own mind to float into deep rest, he lost concentration quickly and let go of the steering wheel ever so slightly, causing a jerking swerve of the minivan, and a near wreck between it and another unknown vehicle that was speeding by in the wrong lane. The entire family was forced awake as Jon attempted to catch a glimpse of what nimrod might have nearly caused the wreck. The rain, and other prevailing weather factors were too thick to see through unfortunately, and forced Jon to continue driving on.

"Jesus!" Carolyn exclaimed from the passenger's seat as she readjusted herself. "What in the hell was that?!"

"Oh, don't worry about it, honey. The guy was probably just confused with this mad weather and drove over in the wrong lane. It's no big deal, and no one was hurt."

"Yeah!" Carolyn said. "It's a damn good thing no one was hurt." She turned to face the kids in the back seat. The first thing she noticed was that Jacob was still asleep. Then, she saw the startled expressions displayed upon her oldest kids' faces. "It's OK you guys. Like your father said, 'it's no big deal'" she said, mockingly.

Later on that night, around ten o' clock precisely, Jon pulled the minivan into the driveway of what the Williams family would now call home. The storm had cleared up quite a bit, and everyone in the van, including Jacob, was wide awake. As Jon pulled the van to a halt, faint barking could be heard from the distance.

"Must be Benjamin" sighed Jon, referring to the family's dog. "Can't believe Stan beat us to the place"

“You had Stan bring Benjamin up here? You told me you were gonna put him in a boarding kennel until you had the time to go get him.” Carolyn said to Jon, with a hint of disbelief.

“OK, first of all, I didn’t have Stan do anything. He realized that we were pressed for space, and happily volunteered to bring Ben up here..... kind of like a favor.”

Carolyn shook her head in disbelief. “You know your brother has 'things' of his own to sort out... with the divorce and all. The last thing he should be worried about is helping us.”

“Well,” Jon said as he switched off the van's ignition and popped open the driver's side door, “it's done now.”

Carolyn watched as her husband went around to the back of the van, unlock the back door, and began leisurely unpacking the luggage. I don’t understand him sometimes, she thought, but I know he means well. She was taken away from her trail of thought as a familiar whistling could be heard from about. She turned around to look out of her window and spotted Stan, Jon's now divorced brother, standing on the wooden steps of the front porch of their new home. He was waving and smiling, whilst beckoning her to meet him there. Carolyn, being the kind woman she was, couldn't help but to return the smile as she opened her door and left the van to chat with Stan.

Jon pulled too large suitcases from the back, and began dragging them up to the house. On his way, he stopped and invited the kids to explore the yard and go play with Benjamin a little. He also asked Rebecca if she could carry Jacob with her for a little while so he and Carolyn could get things set up. Rebecca did as she was told and unstrapped Jacob from his seat, and exited the van, wondering if Jeremy would sum up the courage to join her.

“Look, Rebecca,” Jeremy said after his sister suggested that he was afraid of the dark, “just because you jumped and screamed when that guy almost hit us doesn’t mean that you gotta try and make me feel bad. Just admit that you're a coward and we can all have a good night.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Just get out and come look around with me,” she said.

Minutes later, Rebecca, with Jacob, and Jeremy were all at the fence that contained an overly excited Benjamin, and one heck of a big backyard. Within the distance were very large, daunting trees that seemed to beckon all three of the Williams kids forward. Jeremy, believing that his testicular fortitude was enough to have him be brave, unlatched the gate door and was the first to walk in. He was followed by a reluctant Rebecca, who was carrying a seemingly bored Jacob.

“Wow,” Rebecca said as she stared around in awe at the fairly large area.

Although there was nothing particularly special or significant about the back yard, the sheer size of it excited the children simply because their previous home's yard wasn't nearly as large... or grassy. It

spawned many new opportunities for them as children, and was something that they had dreamed of for a while. Jeremy began walking around to examine the rear of their medium sized new home. Everything, from the red brick structuring of the exterior, to the various windows placed here, and there, grasped the child's attention unwaveringly.

Even the grass, which was cut clean, and fairly soft to walk over, was welcoming and homely. Jeremy knew that at first he had his doubts about moving to Grovesford, but all doubts were dismissed from his mind. He was home.

“This is so cool,” Jeremy said. He was slightly taken aback when Benjamin ran over to him and began licking his hand excitedly. He hadn't seen his canine friend in a few days now, and he figured now was as good a time as ever to get 'caught up' on things, so he playfully rubbed the top of Ben's head and ran around the large yard as the black Labrador chased him.

Baby Jacob, getting restless in Rebecca's hold and wanting to either be fed or put in a soft bed, began crying.

“Shh, it's OK. C'mon, we'll find mom and dad, and...”

At that moment, someone's hand landed on her shoulder abruptly, and caused her to jump and scream loudly.

“Rebecca, calm down! It's just me!” came the all too familiar voice of Jon, her father.

“Dad, what the.... heck was that! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” Rebecca protested.

“You're far too young to be having heart attacks, honey,” Jon said jokingly.

With an exasperated sigh, Rebecca said, “Well here, Jacob's started crying.”

Jon took Jacob from Rebecca's arms and carried him away, winking at Rebecca with smile. “We'll all be ordering dinner tonight if any restaurants are open, so make sure you all come in the house in about fifteen minutes. Oh, and don't get scared out here all by yourselves,”

As Rebecca glowered watching her father carry Jacob from the backyard, Jeremy jogged over, laughing uncontrollably.

“What's so freaking funny, huh?” Rebecca asked him.

“You are such a wuss!” Jeremy exclaimed with grievous gratification.

“What? I am not a wuss. You and dad are just jerks.”

“No,” Jeremy corrected her. “Dad is a genius, and I am simply an entertained bystander!” The mocking laughter persisted.

Suddenly, barking could be heard in the distance. It caused Jeremy’s laughing to cease. It sounded like angry, warning type of barking. Both Jeremy and Rebecca slowly turned their heads to see what the matter was. They spotted Ben, standing defensively, snarling and barking madly.... at someone, encased within shade, standing in their backyard near the hulking trees. The person, whether it be a man or a woman, was clothed entirely in a slenderly worn and tattered black, hooded robe. The hood hid this person's entire face minus what looked like a small pair of radiant red eyes.

“Should we tell mom and dad?” Jeremy asked, dumbfounded.

“I thought you weren't afraid of...” Rebecca responded, but Jeremy had already begun speed walking out of the backyard. She turned and watched as her younger sibling put his common sense to good use as he left the backyard through the open fence door. Rebecca was startled as Benjamin ran over to her and began licking her hand, whining. She then reverted her attention to the area where the hooded figure was standing, but to her shock, he, or she, was gone. Not knowing what was going on, Rebecca simply patted Ben’s head and walked slowly out of the backyard through the open fence door. As she was exiting, she noticed Ben staring intently at the towering, eerie trees that lined the edge of their backyard. Ben’s ears were propped up, as if he were listening in on something. Rebecca stared out at the trees also, as they rustled peacefully with the slight wind blowing. She figured that whatever they had seen, it wouldn't return in any capacity. Or at least she hoped it wouldn't. Perhaps it was just a joke someone was playing. Or perhaps not. Whatever it was, it scared her, Jeremy, and Benjamin.

Dinner was a somewhat awkward event that night. Jon kept asking Jeremy what was wrong because Jeremy had a numb look glued on his face the whole night. Rebecca ate her dinner very quickly, then went on to explore the rest of the house. Since the dining room and kitchen were on the ground floor, the family could keep an eye on Benjamin through glass back doors that led out into the vast backyard. Unfortunately, the expression and body language that Benjamin displayed both bothered, and frightened Carolyn and Jon alike. Benjamin sat on the patio area outside, looking into the house at the family with an extremely tormented expression, as if he wanted nothing more than to be let into the house. But what disturbed Jon and his wife the most was the fact that Benjamin would occasionally glance behind him as if making sure nothing was about to creep up onto him. That and the fact that Ben wouldn't stop whining so much.

The dinner lasted only thirty minutes max since everyone was in such strange moods. Jon and Carolyn knew that they would have plenty of work to do tomorrow since the house still needed decorating and their respective luggage bags still needed unpacking. But they weren't thinking about that at the moment. They exchanged looks at each other, then Carolyn thanked Stan for everything before she left the table and ventured upstairs in search of her daughter.

“You know.” Stan began, “I always loved the way you and your wife did things. Such simplicity and not much complexity.”

“Yeah,” Jon chuckled, “that's us. Plain and boring to the core.” Jon then focused his attention on Jeremy and stood from the table and grabbed his plate. “Alright, son, you ready to go and see the rest of the house?”

Jeremy, seemingly infused within a trance of shock, 'woke up' at the sound of his father's voice and responded with, “Oh, uh.... yeah, Dad.” Jeremy stood from the table and brought his half empty plate over to the sink and placed it on the counter.

Stan stood from the table also, while tiredly checking his watch. “Well,” he said, “Look's like it's about time for me to get back to business. It's been nice seeing you all again, Jon.”

“Oh,” Jon said. “Do I need to give you a lift somewhere, or...”

“Oh no, I have a ride.” Stan said..

Jon couldn't remember seeing another vehicle when he pulled up. “But, where's your-,” he began.

“A friend of mine is borrowing it to run some errands. She ought to be back any moment now,” Stan said as he leisurely began heading for the front door of the house.

“Wait,” Jon said, leaving his son alone in the kitchen to catch his younger brother.

As his father ran off to speak with Stan, Jeremy turned his attention to the back yard again. He noticed Benjamin sitting on the patio, blankly staring up at him with those big eyes of his. Jeremy decided to go back out into the backyard to explore a bit more. He unlocked the door, and stepped back outside.

Meanwhile, Stan and Jon were in the midst of an engrossing conversation.

“Yeah,” Stan was saying. “It's always difficult when you have to leave the one you love, but things like that happen.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, I understand man. Well, I understand you have to leave, so I'll just let ya go. It's been fun talking with you again.” Jon said.

Stan placed one of his large hands on his brother's shoulder. Stan was a fairly muscular man with intense features. His jaw was chiseled and his eyebrow's were somewhat protruded, casting a slight shadow over his green eyes. His hair was always buzzed short, and he was fairly tall, around 6'4”. “It has, brother. It has.” he said these words just as a blonde woman driving a blue convertible pulled up in front of the house and honked the horn. After a man to man handshake, Stan walked off of the front porch and entered the car. Once he closed the passenger side door, they sped off.

Jon was about to close the door until he noticed out of the corner of his eye, Benjamin chasing the convertible, and Jeremy chasing Benjamin. As a father, Jon's first instinct was to jump off of the porch and chase after the both of them... and that's what he did. During this episode, Jon yelled out both Benjamin and Jeremy's names, but neither of them would stop. Jeremy did, at one point, turn and see his father chasing them, but he didn't stop chasing after Benjamin. Matters only worsened when Jon realized that it had to be at least eleven thirty by now. What a first day in Grovesford.

After nearly fifteen minutes of madly running, Jeremy stopped, as Benjamin was too fast for him. Jon stopped too, and had to bend over his knees in order to catch his breath and avoid some sort of respiratory failure. Jeremy could only stand there and watch as Benjamin vanished through some trees off in the distance. Looking around, Benjamin realized that they must have run out of their neighborhood since no houses were around and there were more trees than before. Many more trees than before.

After catching his breath, Jon stood up straight and glared down at his son, who was red faced. "You wanna tell me what in the hell that was all about?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Ben saw someone standing in the back yard, dad. Someone was walking around in the woods around the house, and Ben chased them around for a while. I followed Ben through the woods and saw the person too. Ben got scared and ran off, probably trying to escape with uncle Stan and I was trying to catch him."

"So, basically, you let Ben chase someone away, then you let him escape and chase Stan's car down the road? You told me you were becoming more responsible. What happened?"

"I'm sorry, dad. I just didn't want anybody breaking in the house or anything. Benjamin kept on growling at them so I thought maybe it would be best to let him chase them. But he, you know, got scared"

Jon couldn't help but let a smile break his stern look. Here was his twelve year old son trying to protect the family from 'strangers'. Jon chuckled silently and glanced down at his watch. It read: 11:45. "Alright, look," Jon began, "we can go and look for Ben for thirty minutes tops. But if we don't find him, and I have to put up fliers and what not, you're gonna be grounded for a good three

weeks, you hear me?"

Jeremy nodded.

"Good. That isn't the way you wanna spend your first few weeks in Alabama, is it? C'mon."

The two began walking onward to where Benjamin had run off to. Ahead of them was a long, dirt covered gray trail that beckoned them onward. On each side of the thin trail were tall trees, some dead, some bustling with life. Either way, the setting gave off an eerie feel and sent chills up Jeremy, and even his father's spine. The aftermath of the storm before seemed to cause the atmosphere to appear foggy, and deathly, almost as if the earth was sick. A slight humming could be heard among the carious trees and

foreign areas. Even though it was dark, shadows seemed to play mind games with the two as each of them noticed, repeatedly, something darting about in the distance. They only hoped that it was Benjamin, but feared otherwise. The occasional branch would break free from a dead tree and land near them, startling them. Over the course of five minutes, both had contemplated turning around and returning to the safety of the house, and leaving the back yard fence door ajar in case Benjamin decided to return. But that wasn't logical and both of them owed it to themselves to prove that they could welcome this small town as home, no matter how creepy it was, as their home.

After a while of slowly edging along, Jon's cell phone rang. It took him a few moments to register the noise since everything around him was so silent. Then, once he realized that it probably was Carolyn, he answered it. "Hello?" he answered, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Jon?" came his wife's voice from the other end. "Jon, where are you? Is Jeremy with you?"

"Uh, yeah, honey, we're fine. Just decided to go for a little walk with Benjamin is all," Jon's voice was quite shaky.

"Honey, it's eleven fifty-five. You need to bring Jeremy back home."

"Alright, alright, we'll be there in a bit."

"I mean it Jon. Be back soon with Jeremy and Ben or I swear, I'll leave you," Carolyn said, using a line she's used for years.

"Love you too, honey," said Jon. He then quickly hung up the phone and slid it back into his pocket. "Look," he said as he turned to face Jeremy. "We don't need to mention any of this to your mother or Rebecca, understand?"

"Yes sir." Jeremy responded reluctantly.

"We gotta turn back now. It's too late for this. We'll have to get up early and finish the search tomorrow."

Following a nod of approval from Jeremy, the two turned around and began walking back to their new home. Suddenly, faint barking could be heard from behind them. They both turned around to see Benjamin running up the path to catch them with his tongue hanging idly out of the side of his mouth.

"Well I'll be," Jon said to himself.

"Ben!" cried Jeremy as Benjamin ran up to him and began madly licking his hands.

Jon, while shaking his head in disbelief, motioned for them to just head back to the house. He'd had enough games for the night, and the one thing he was empty on was sleep. A good night's rest would help replenish

his mind. With Stan abruptly replacing his wife, Jeremy and Rebecca's petrified looks at the dinner table, and Benjamin's new free roam initiative, Jon was more than ready to just lay down, let these issues vanish, and start anew tomorrow morning. Unaware of the darkened, hooded figure silently watching them as they ventured off, he truly believed that the problems could be dreamed away.... and if the ungodly events that would unfold in the coming weeks were any indication, he couldn't have been more wrong.

II.

Victimized It was quite a lucky case when Jon, Jeremy, and Benjamin had all returned home when they did. Any later and Carolyn might have had to call on a neighborhood search, and Jon wasn't ready to get acquainted with any neighbors just yet... at least not like that. Besides, there was quite the bit of work to be done, and time was a vital factor. Jeremy and Rebecca had to be enrolled in schools soon, the house still needed furnishing, and Jon had to get his 'job' situation together. He wasn't quite sure whether he wanted to continue in the line of work he had back in Florida, or start something new and fresh, but he did know that he was beginning to take a likening to cutting wood.

In fact, over the course of the weeks following Benjamin's escapade, Jon has been spending quite some time cutting random logs in their wide back yard. Something about the great amount of shrubbery and such sort of made him 'like' the great outdoors. Now, back in Florida, the only plants you really saw were the stereotypical palm trees. But something about being further north in Grovesford, where trees were plentiful, awakened a new 'man' within Jon.

On occasion, Jon would attempt to get Jeremy to join him in cutting logs. He even went to such extremes as buying an old axe for the both of them to use, even though Jeremy's inferior physical strength didn't allow him to properly handle the tool. Nonetheless, Jon still spent hours on end just cutting, and cutting. In fact, over the span of a few short weeks, he had put on a very respectable amount of muscle, and has emerged from his former 'geeky' appearance and had evolved into a "slim, lean lumberjack". He even began to wear normal t-shirts as apposed to those geeky button ones.

It was a calm Sunday evening, four weeks following the move into their new home in Grovesford. The Williams, all of them, were comfortably adjusting to gist of the land. Rebecca had made many friends since her arrival at the local high school, and spent most of her time socializing and what not. Jeremy took a liking to spending time with Benjamin. Since the yard was big enough, Jeremy and Benjamin could spend hours every afternoon playing and exploring the unknown wonders that lurked in and beyond the large trees that lined the extremities. Carolyn had to keep herself at home to tend to Jacob. She constantly contemplated getting a day job since Jon didn't seem to find interest in doing work that provides a profit anymore, but she ultimately decided to rely on her instincts and pray that he would come to.

Jon was in the backyard, doing his now routine log chopping. He was unaware, however, of the man standing next to the fence door that led into the back yard, watching him intently as he chopped like mad. The man seemed to really like Jon's progress as more and more logs became nothing more than flying wood debris. Feeling that it was impolite to 'stalk' people, the man decided to whistle loudly. Luckily, he caught Jon's attention.

Jon stopped his cutting, wiped the sweat off of his forehead, and glanced up at whoever wanted him. Squinting, he noticed a thin, late-aged police officer standing there with his long, thin arms crossed. The officer's hat covered a third of his face so Jon couldn't even see the man's eyes, but he felt the cold sting of the man's icy gaze. One thing, however, caught Jon off guard. Jon noticed a shiny, golden, star shaped badge pinned to the man's uniform, right over his shirt pocket. Even from afar, Jon could now conclude that this was, indeed, the police sheriff of Grovesford.

"Hey, there," Jon said as he casually strode over to the fence gate, still clutching the axe.

"I see you like cuttin' that there wood," came the reply of the elderly man.

Jon silently acknowledged the hardened, gravelly, time tested voice of this man. He figured that the sheriff must have been in the service for years.... seen it all, done it all.

"Now," the sheriff began, "I dun seen it all, but I don' think I've ever seen anyone cut wood like you do sir."

This bought a slight smile to Jon's face. He rubbed the stubble of a five o' clock shadow beard that nested around his chin and cheeks. "I'm no lumberjack, but--"

"Would you like to be one?" the sheriff interrupted.

Jon looked hard into what he could see of the man's eyes. "Well, I don't see why not." he finally said.

The sheriff held out his bony hand for Jon to shake. "I'm Mathew Kunzler. Sheriff Kunzler."

Jon met the man's hand with his own. "Jon Williams," Jon said in response.

As Jon opened the gate and invited sheriff Kunzler into his back yard, the two men delved into a deep, and long conversation about various topics. Jon explained his past a little, and told sheriff Kunzler why he chose to move from Miami to Grovesford. Sheriff Kunzler gave Jon a great amount of insight on the happenings of Grovesford, from it's distant past, to its questionable present. The sheriff even acknowledged how small of a town it is now compared to what a buzzing metropolis it once was. The two men seemed to fit each other like puzzle pieces. Their conversation was easy going, and many new things were learned from each man to the other. Jon, however, was locked on when sheriff Kunzler told tales of his past as a seasoned war veteran, a volunteer fire fighter, and how he finally came to and chose to become a sheriff. He noted many

interesting things about his time growing up in Alabama. He informed Jon that he never finished, or graduated high school because his family was so broken apart during his teenage years.

“Ain't never easy livin' like I had to,” sheriff Kunzler told Jon. “But you learn, adapt, and overcome all obstacles. Now, I'm not sayin' that your stay here in Grovesford will be pestered with problems, but this ain't no wonder land, I'll tell ya that.”

Their conversation took place while Kunzler watched Jon chop up some logs, after which he explained to Jon what his job would be as a lumberjack. He told Jon that he would be working as the new local lumberman, since Grovesford was such a small town. He also informed Jon that if he were to get a call from the sheriff's station to go and take care of a cutting job, then he was to bring his axe and drive on over to wherever the location may be. It was an easy enough job that would get money in Jon's pockets. The hard part would be explaining the matter to Carolyn, and shutting down his small business in Miami.

The sun had begun to set now. Jon had said his goodbyes to sheriff Kunzler a few hours earlier, and was now in the kitchen, washing his hands and mentally preparing his explanation to Carolyn, who was on the opposite side of the kitchen, preparing the meal.

Jon cleared his throat to gain attention. “So, how was your day honey?”

“Just tell me what you have to tell me,” came Carolyn's speedy response.

Jon felt the sudden urge to just walk into the back yard and cut more wood. He didn't expect Carolyn to agree with what he was about to say, but he then dismissed the idea of backing out now. He was a man and, by God, he was going to law down the law in his house. “I'm shutting down the company in Miami.”

Carolyn stopped what she was doing and turned to face her husband. “Why?” was her response.

“Actually, I'm, uh, glad you asked. I met the sheriff today, nice man. Anyway, he saw me chopping up the wood back there and offered me a job as the local lumberman. I accepted.”

Carolyn, by surprise, began to smile at Jon's declarations. “A lumberman? Jon, c'mon, you can't be serious.”

“Well, I am serious. I'm really liking the idea of a more physically demanding line of work. And besides, it'll be too difficult to keep up with the company from here anyways.”

Sighing, Carolyn decided that it would be against her better judgment to argue. “I guess that makes since. But are you sure you wanna be a lumberman? Out of all the things you could do, are you sure that cutting wood is where your heart's at?”

Jon turned the faucet off and walked slyly over to his wife. After giving her a kiss of assurance, he said, "Yes. My heart and my mind."

Jon then went on to explain to Carolyn that sheriff Kunzler had invited the family to dinner at his place for Monday evening. Jon told Carolyn that he had already accepted the invitation and thought it'd be best to have someone babysit Jacob while they were gone. He figured that having Jacob around, having tantrums, would give off the wrong impression on the sheriff's family. Carolyn agreed, arranged for a babysitter to show up tomorrow, then proceeded to call down Jeremy and Rebecca for dinner.

A seventeen year old girl by the name of Callie Joanna Porter, one of Rebecca's new close friends, was chosen to watch Jacob and Benjamin in the time that the rest of the Williams family were away at the sheriff's place. Callie was an averaged height girl with long, brunette colored hair. She was somewhat 'bubbly' in attitude. She always had a smile on her face, and she always wore blue and white combination outfits. Jon and Carolyn figured that they could trust her to make sure that Jacob didn't overuse a diaper, or that Benjamin didn't decide to escape again.

Jon had given Callie specific instructions regarding the care of his son. As for Benjamin, he just told her to keep an eye on him and make sure that his food bowl didn't stay empty for too long. Jon also made it clear that they probably wouldn't be back before dark, so they allowed Callie to ravage the kitchen as she saw fit.

At around seven thirty, the sun began setting. Callie and Jacob were in the family room on the second floor, laughing and giggling at the stupidest of diversions. A show intended for younger children blared loudly on the flat panel television. Various baby toys and things were scattered along the carpeted floor. It was truly a fool's wonderland, and a blissful one at that. However, as the skies grew gradually blacker outside, something strange indeed was occurring.

Outside the Williams peaceful abode, eight unwelcome darkly hooded figures stood side by side in the front yard. It was as if they had appeared there without making any noise because Benjamin hadn't noticed, and neither did anyone else in the near surrounding area. These eight strangers just stood there, cloaked in all black hooded coverings, watching the home with a seemingly venomous intent. Their eyes, unnaturally to say the least, radiated a slight red hue as if they weren't even human at all. Whatever the case may have been, these unknown trespassers stood in the shadow of the abode waiting patiently for their chance to cause unmitigated harm.

Back inside the house, Callie was just about done tidying up the living room and getting Jacob to bed. Once done with that, she began turning off all lights. She purposefully left the television on because she figured that the Williams would eventually return home. She stood in the darkened living room now, wondering what she should do to pass the time. She glanced over at a digital clock sitting on a nearby dresser. It read:

7:55. Callie then smiled to herself as she grabbed a pack of cigarettes, and headed downstairs, making sure to leave a kitchen lamp on. She left the house, walked off the porch, and stood in the front yard to begin smoking. She was half aware that she had left the front door wide open, but she just didn't seem to care. What was the worst that could happen anyways?

Behind her, the previously mentioned hooded strangers materialized from the shadows of the darkened porch, and strode silently into the home. The final one to enter the house slowly shut and locked the front door. One of them noticed the lamp that Callie had left on and violently knocked it off of the nightstand it rested on, shattering the bulb, immersing the entire downstairs area in complete darkness. This action startled Benjamin. He awoke from the backyard and ran over to the glass windows. Peering inside, he noticed the eight strangers silently making their way upstairs, and began barking frantically. This caused the rear stranger to turn and stare at Benjamin from the stairs. The man's frigid gaze instantly ceased Benjamin's barking. The only thing Benjamin could do now was whimper and hope someone heard.

From outside the house in the front yard, Callie had finished her cigarette and was ready to head back inside. She flicked the stub to the ground, stuffed the carton into her jeans pocket, and turned toward the front door. Noticing that it was closed caused her to stop in her tracks. She could have sworn that she left the door open... or maybe she was hallucinating. Dismissing the thoughts, she walked up the stairs of the porch and reached out for the knob. When she tried turning it, it wouldn't budge. She tried turning the knob more fiercely now to no avail. Giving up, she stepped off the porch and headed for the fence that led into the back yard. She unlatched the lock and walked around to the glass backdoor. She noticed Benjamin laying on the patio looking extremely sad.

“Awww,” she said, mocking him.” What's the matter?” Callie glanced over at Benjamin's food bowl and noticed it was full. “You must miss your family, huh boy. Well don't worry, they'll be back soon.”

Callie turned the knob of the backdoor, expecting the same outcome as the front one, but was surprised when it actually turned all the way and opened. Wondering what in the hell was going on, Callie cautiously stepped into the blackened abyss. She made sure to close the backdoor behind her this time.

As Callie attempted to maneuver within the dark house, she noticed how eerily silent it was. To her horror, she realized that the television had been turned off, along with all the other lights. Just when she was thinking that things couldn't get any worse, Callie heard Jacob's infant voice from upstairs..... followed foreign whispering from multiple other voices. Callie came to the conclusion that someone must have entered the house unwelcome.

From outside, Benjamin began whining again. Callie, being far too bothered by the situation, ignored it. However, if she had chosen to pay attention to it, she would have noticed the silhouette revealed by the moonlight of a hooded figure wielding a very large kitchen knife, lurking silently behind her with immoral intent. Luckily, Callie was able to catch the glare of something shiny coming from behind her, and instinctively turned around..... but nothing was there.... and Benjamin was nowhere to be seen in the backyard.

Callie slowly walked over to the glass doors that looked out into the back yard. She pressed her hand firmly against the cold window and whispered Benjamin's name. A loud, startling noise from upstairs caused her to jump and jerk her head towards the stairs. She knew she would have to go up there eventually. Jacob was up there and was more than likely in serious danger.

Slowly, Callie began making her way over to the stairs. As she neared them, the sound of music could be heard....“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” was playing from somewhere up there. Horrible images played through Callie’s mind. This was a very sick game. And Callie was inclining to her defeat.

At the bottom of the stairs, six of the hooded strangers stood side by side, silently watching as Callie, unaware of their presence, descended further into the unknown. As Callie reached the top of the stairs, she glanced down the small hallway that led to other rooms. All of the doors to the rooms were open.... except Jacob’s. Callie was sure that the eerie nursery rhyme was coming from Jacob’s room. She was now sweaty and her hands were shaking. She thought that a baby would naturally be making some sort of noise. But because the music was the only thing she heard, she wasn’t even sure that Jacob was in his room.

Thinking that the madness had ceased, Callie was nearly frightened to death when she heard a whimper coming from downstairs. She slowly turned around and, on the wall, she could see the shadow of something on the stairs. As she thought about whether she should continue towards Jacob's room or see what the “whining” was, a loud yelp, from a dog, pierced the silence. Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star was still playing from Jacob’s room. Callie decided to see what happened on the stairs. She walked slowly to the top of them, peered over the railing, and nearly threw up. Laying there, on the top few stairs, was half of Benjamin's body. The other half was at the near the bottom, slowly sliding down to the floor.

Callie placed a hand over her mouth and backed away from the stairs. She decided to go ahead and enter Jacob’s room. She knew that she had to get him, and herself, out of the house before... Callie stopped at Jacob’s doorway. Inside, it was very dark except the slight glow of eerie moonlight that washed over the small figure in the center of the otherwise empty room.... Jacob’s crib.

Callie walked over to Jacob’s crib as the music continued to play ever so softly. She glanced inside.... and saw nothing. She stared down at the crib in utter disbelief. How could I have let this happen, she thought to herself. She slowly extended a hand to touch the soft cloth blanket that was neatly folded inside the crib. Then, without warning, someone grabbed Callie’s hair from behind, violently yanked her head backwards, and slammed her into a nearby wall. Callie was completely thrown off guard by this sudden attack. She attempted to slowly turn around to get a look at her attacker, but whoever it may have been sent a firm fist across her jaw, nearly knocking her unconscious. Her bottom lip was busted, and her face was slightly bruised. Her attacker let go of her head and she dropped to her knees. She began crawling away, out of the room through the open doorway. The attacker slowly followed her, staying very close.

Callie crawled over to the door that led into Jon and Carolyn's bedroom. She forced herself to stand up and open the door. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her attacker, one of the hooded strangers, as they passed a patch of moonlight, slowly lurking down the hallway. Callie then hurried into the room and

simultaneously shut and locked the door. She then scanned the room as best she could and spotted a telephone laying on a dresser near the window that looked out onto the front yard. The hooded man outside the room was now jerking at the door knob. If Callie wanted to survive, she would have to hurry and call the police.

Callie went over to the phone and lifted up the receiver. She began dialing 911 but the door to the room suddenly burst open as the hooded assailant lurked inside. Thinking very quickly, Callie tore the receiver away from the rest of the device and threw it at the attacker. She then ran over to him and tackled him to the ground. She attempted to put a hurting on whomever this person may be, but, with incredible speed and strength, the hooded man caught her fist on the first blow attempt and forced her entire body off of his. Callie, knowing that this was not a battle she could win, stood up and ran for the stairs. However, as she attempted to pass her fallen attacker, he grabbed her ankle, causing her to fall forward onto the top part of the stair railing as her head and arms swung wildly over it. Then, without a moment's hesitation, Callie noticed another hooded figure standing on the stairs wielding Jon's axe as he brought it swinging, severing her head from her body, as it dangled over the railing of the landing.

All eight of the intruders met downstairs near the front door, as their deed was now done. Callie was dead. Benjamin was dead. And now, Jacob was in their possession. One of the eight hooded men had the sleeping infant in his arms. After all of them got a good look at him, one of them nodded, unlocked and opened the front door, and exited the house. The other seven followed suit. The eight men vanished into the night, leaving behind two bodies, blood stained walls, and an empty crib. As they all dematerialized within the shades and gloom of the night, and as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" continued to play in the background, the town of Grovesford held it's breath, because this was merely the beginning of things to come.

III.

Questions The fallout of the recent massacrings was truly devastating. Jon, Carolyn, and Rebecca were all left in grave shock. Sheriff Kunzler didn't seem to overreact about the crimes. He did, however, seem quite bothered. He acted as if he expected this to happen, but at the same time it bothered him to death that it happened. It bothered him because he felt that he was somewhat responsible for it all. If he hadn't have invited Jon and his family to dinner, all of this could have been avoided..... maybe.

Jon and Carolyn shared the same feeling; a feeling of utter defeat and total damnation. Their son, their child, was kidnapped from under their noses, and they didn't even have the slightest clue as to who might have taken him. They don't know why he was taken, and they didn't know if they would ever get him back. All they did know was that their lives had been, like Callie and Benjamin, slaughtered.

Exactly three weeks shadowing those tragedies, Jon and sheriff Kunzler spent most of their time doing vigorous researching and investigating, but sheriff Kunzler proved to be of no real help as he kept a low

profile following the crime. He eventually became extremely difficult to reach through any means of communication. Jon noted that his axe was missing from the crime scene. He also recalled seeing Benjamin's body split in half. He couldn't help but wonder if Benjamin had been on the receiving end of one of the assailants swinging the axe. While all of these things were things that Jon pondered quite often, nothing he concluded helped him get any closer to the revelation of the attackers.

One month. One whole month and no leads whatsoever. Jon began losing hope. He noticed that Carolyn's once motherly characteristics were gone, replaced by a void, dead soul within a dying body. Everything seemed to just continue falling apart. It was as if he was in a shoving battle with a brick wall: pushing his hardest, but going absolutely nowhere. Finally, overtaken by defeat, he attempted to call sheriff Kunzler one last time, to tell him that he wanted to resign from his position as a lumberman. However, that was not how the conversation went down.

“Jon,” came sheriff Kunzler's gravely, rough voice through the receiver, “Before you say anything, I want to tell you that I know who did it.”

Sheriff Kunzler and Jon met at a local coffee shop about thirty or so minutes away from the Williams' home. They sat across from one another at a small table in the corner, isolating themselves from the rest of the people there.

“It ain't ever easy dealin' with things like this,” said sheriff Kunzler as he stared hard at his reflection inside his full coffee cup. “I've always thought that I was a brave man, but I'm just a mere white speck in this black sea of evil, darkness, and satanism.”

Jon stared at the sheriff. The man looked broken, even though it wasn't his child that was kidnapped. With a sigh of sympathy, Jon said, “Sheriff, I don't understand. What...”

“It's been happening for years, Jon.”

This statement caught Jon by surprise. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Innocent people slaughtered. Babies kidnapped. They've been doing it for years.”

Jon still wasn't understanding any of this at all. “Who is 'they'?”

Sheriff Kunzler sighed. “No one knows,” he said, propping his elbows onto the coffee table and folding his hands together. “No one knows.”

Jon remained puzzled. “Is it a gang, or...?” he asked.

“A cult.” The sheriff seemed to be entranced within deep memories. “Everyone in Grovesford assumes they're satanists. Some folk believe that they aren't even human.” he told Jon. “The only thing we know for sure is that they've been defacing this town.....for a very long time.”

Jon found it difficult to take in all of this information. He looked down at the table trying to think of what made sense and what didn't. The fact was, none of it made sense. None at all.

Sheriff Kunzler continued, “Yes sir, this has been goin' on for years on end. Everybody, from innocent children, to the elderly have become victims. Some of us suppose that the kidnappings are part of a practice. A ritual. The killings on the other hand..... we assume they do that for fun.”

The sheriff's words caused Jon's mind to begin working again. “You say it's been happening for years. How long exactly? And why is it that no one has been able to stop them?”

“Well,” the sheriff began, “There are some old police records that suggest that this has been goin' on since the early 1700s. But we can't be sure. Whatever these cultists have working within their minds, it ain't holy. It ain't natural. They sift in and out of the dark like shadows. They show up to kill and destroy, then vanish with the snap of a finger. They're an immoral disease. A sickness. A curse. Murdering folk is fun to them. Grovesford is their playground.”

Both Jon and the sheriff sat in silence trying to put the few pieces to this very large puzzle together. Many people in Grovesford have linked this group and their actions with unholy, ritualistic doings and such, but no one had the slightest clue as to why it was happening, or how to stop it. Perhaps no one would ever find out. Some figured that the cultists were merely terrorists in costumes. Others, however, knew better. Most figured that maybe they could have been normal members of the Grovesford society that lost their minds and decided to unionize themselves in an effort to reinvent the word 'terror'. Whatever the case may be, this group had managed to avoid being stopped or captured for over three centuries. One would simply have to assume that there was some sort of supernatural on-goings tied to the cult and the children they kidnapped.

It was a strange case, and one that was virtually uncrackable. What was one to do when everyone that had managed to see these hooded assailants close up ended up mutilated? What was one to do when every single piece of so called 'evidence' lead to nothing in the end. Was one to just give in and continue to allow these 'satanists' to continue on with unmitigated manslaughter? These questions and thoughts ran continuously through the minds of both Jon and sheriff Kunzler, and the one thing that they were sure of was that the cult would more than likely strike again.

IV.

Thou The Unholy The large, dark interior of the huge cathedral seemed very contradictory of its underlying purpose, however, Jon still claimed this place as a safe haven during the times of insensible turmoil, such as now. He had come here to put his mind at ease and speak with Pastor Morgan, an elderly man of small stature but a massive amount of knowledge. He and the pastor had dived right into a deep conversation of Jon's domestic problems and the issue with Jacob and the intruders that took him. So far, Jon thought that the pastor was doing quite a good job with giving him hope.

"You haven't lost your mind, yet," the elderly man said with a slight smile. "It tells me that your son, Jacob, is still very much alive, and you know it."

Jon returned the man's smile with one of his own. "Right, right. But my wife and I, we find that very hard to believe. We've been looking for answers to this for a while now and nothing has come up so far. It's tearing us apart."

"Have faith," the pastor told him. "Have faith and all of the answers to the stated issue will unfurl before your very eyes."

Jon thought about what the pastor had told him as he sat in the stands, alone. The pastor stood next to him and smiled. As reassuring as the pastor's words may have been, it still didn't eliminate the fact that Jon felt hauntingly endangered. No matter what anyone told him, he still felt like there was a large target on his back that was intended for an unknown threat.

At the end of the long aisle, the large double doors leading in and out of the cathedral burst open, allowing an overwhelming amount of sunlight to wash away the gloom of the church for the moment. After the doors closed again and the light subsided, sheriff Kunzler came walking into the church. He had on his usual sheriff's outfit and wore a somewhat blank expression on his aged face.

As the sheriff neared him, Jon stood up, thanked the pastor for his kind words, and shook hands with the sheriff.

"Evening," said sheriff Kunzler, still expressionless.

"Uh, evening sheriff. What are you doing....."

"I got somethin'" the sheriff interrupted him.

Jon stared into the sheriff's eyes, attempting to figure him out. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Listen, I had some of my men set up video cameras and keep watch on your house during the night time just in case strange activity was happenin'."

“And?”

The sheriff now had a bothered look on his face. He seemed reluctant to tell Jon anything that he'd discovered, but he knew that it was for the best. “Jon, from what we gathered, they have been outside of your home every night since the murders.”

Jon was slightly taken aback by this. “What?” was all he could say.

“In some of the videos, we can see them, all eight of them, gathered somewhere near or around your house, just waiting and watching.”

Jon said nothing in response to this. He simply stared at the hard floor of the cathedral as various thoughts swirled around his mind. He and his family were being stalked now, and he hadn't known about it until this point. Just how helpless was he? Why hadn't he noticed something so obvious before?

“Look, Jon, this isn't as bad as it

seems.” Kunzler attempted to lighten Jon's spirits.

Jon, suddenly demotivated, looked up at the sheriff with eyes of sorrow. “It isn't bad? My family has been.... stalkedby psychopaths. Satanists. They have my kid. You're telling me that this isn't bad?”

“Jon, listen to me. In the videos, they appear around your house at about ten 'o clock. If we can stay away from your house for one night and watch it from a distance, we can catch 'em.”

“What about my family? We're just going to leave them there as bait!?”

“Dammit, Jon! This isn't the first time I've tried to deal with them. I told you that this town has been at their mercy for years. Now, I know you want your son back and all, but you gotta trust me now. This might be the only chance we have at gettin' to 'em.”

After more back and forth arguments and disagreements, Jon accepted the sheriff's plans and listened as he explained them. Jon realized that he was willing to take any measures of getting Jacob back and then getting the hell out of Grovesford. He knew that the distress caused by Jacob's absence was bearing down harder than ever now on his family, and he wanted nothing more than to ease the pain, and restore sanity. He just hoped that if they found Jacob, he was still alive.

The bright luminescent light of the moon's glow shown over the large, eerie trees and washed over the small town with malice effect. It cause everything to seem somehow darker and colder, as if washing away the otherwise optimistic atmosphere and revealing the true sullen colors of the town and it's people. It was

unsettling, but perhaps more so ever since the gruesome massacring that occurred at the Williams home no too long ago.

Inside the Williams home, Carolyn had her remaining two children nestled inside the master bedroom. She chose not to tell them exactly why they couldn't just sleep in their own rooms because it would only cause panic..... something she didn't need at the moment. She wanted as much "peace" as the situation would allow. But her children, Jeremy and Rebecca, couldn't help but wonder why their mother paced the carpeted floor, wielding a compact handgun, and wearing a very distraught expression upon her once beautiful face. Even though Carolyn wouldn't let on, Jeremy and Rebecca knew something was very wrong.

Jon continued to twiddle his thumbs as he sat in the hot, black car next to sheriff Kunzler. The car was parked some thirty or so feet away from the Williams home so both men could keep a good view on the house and, God forbid, the cult. Thus far, nothing had happened that seemed out of the norm.... yet.

"You ought to calm down," Kunzler said to Jon, noticing his twitchy behavior. "We ain't gotta problem yet."

Jon laughed tepidly. "Yeah," he said, "yet."

Hours passed to the point where Jon and sheriff Kunzler were forcing each other to stay awake. Inside the car, Jon glanced wearily at the little digital clock glowing green in the dark. It read 12:22 AM. After rubbing his face in exhaustion, Jon turned to the sheriff to tell him that they should probably just call it a night, but the old man was deep in slumber. Jon was going to wake him up, but his intentions to watch the house were too strong, so he continued to do so, until he too fell asleep involuntarily....a mistake that he would soon regret.

The trees and bushes around the 'hidden' car suddenly began rustling. Soon, all eight of the hooded men emerged from the shrubbery, slowly, mutely, and surrounded the car. One of them stood at the front of the car, staring in at the sleeping men, as he tightly wielded Jon's old axe. After a long pause, he lifted the axe high above his head, and brought it down with incredible force, shattering the windshield. The car's alarm now blared loudly as both Jon and sheriff Kunzler struggled to wake up and gather themselves. However, by the time they were aware of the situation, the entire cult had vanished. Across the street, Jon saw his wife emerge from the house with her gun, looking around frantically. He realized that she must have heard the commotion. Jon looked over at sheriff Kunzler who was staring wide eyed at the broken windshield, holding a loaded pistol of his own. Even though his heart was still racing, Jon's mind was clear enough for him to ponder what just happened. Jon knew that these men... these people, whoever they were, were not fooling around. They'd outsmarted them, and they could have damn well killed them had they chosen to do so. But they didn't. And that bothered Jon.

He and the sheriff exited the car after silencing the alarm. They stood at the front of the car and stared at the ruined windshield.

"This ain't good. Ain't good at all." sheriff Kunzler said.

“Why didn’t they kill us?” Jon asked, staring blankly at the mess.

“Ain't got no reason to, I recon.” said the sheriff as he rubbed his bony chin. “Guess we'll have to give 'em one.”

Jon prayed that either he or the sheriff would get any info leading to the whereabouts of the murderers that took his son. For better or worse, his prayers were answered. After discussing the matter with damn near the entire town, a hermit located near the outskirts of Grovesford informed sheriff Kunzler that the assailants were to be found at the cathedral. The hermit claimed that the cult was the reason he'd moved away from the Grovesford. Finding this interesting, sheriff Kunzler chose to question his knowledge. The hermit admitted to the sheriff that he had once been a victim of the cult's actions, a long time ago, and that he had been captured and tortured. He then told the sheriff that his entire family was massacred unmercifully by the cult in a manner of 'sacrifice'. He explained that he watched as his mother's eyes were gouged and the skin of her face was peeled off and shoved into her mouth, choking her. Having heard enough, sheriff Kunzler asked the man what he had done to get captured and tortured, but the hermit declined to answer, so he was arrested for further investigation. It seemed odd, yet fitting that the cult had potentially chosen to hide at the one place that no one would ever think to look.

Did this mean that Jacob was at the cathedral? Was any of this information even true? Jon and sheriff Kunzler weren't going to let a chance such as this slip up. Regardless of how true or how false it was, they had to look into it until they knew for certain. They had prepared themselves for the worst by arming themselves with a loaded handgun each. They decided that the evening would be the best time to search the cathedral, as to not draw any attention to themselves. Jon's van, since the sheriff's car was still being repaired, was parked around the rear of the cathedral, but parked a good distance away from it. From their vantage point, they could see quite a bit of the huge structure. Now, guns loaded, and minds alert, they were ready..... or at least they hoped.

Darkness quickly fell upon the town, a darkness that encased years of visceral anguish. Jon had urged sheriff Kunzler hours ago to join him in scouting the area of the cathedral, but the sheriff had declined and told Jon that it would be best to just remain in the car until they saw something. But what were they gonna see? Eight men in hoods hover across the parking lot into the building?

Or were they expected to see the cult pull up in some vehicle? As much as he knew he'd regret it, Jon agreed with the sheriff.

Time seemed to be against them, instead of with them. Jon just wanted something to happen, and soon. Sighing with complete desperation and exhaustion, Jon glanced down at the digital clock that remained glowing bright green inside the van, in the dashboard. It read 11:57 PM. Figuring that this whole idea was beginning to prove just how useless it was, Jon took the van's keys and ignited the engine, just as a faint yellow light shown from one of the cathedral's large windows. Jon didn't seem to notice, but sheriff Kunzler

was all eyes. He grabbed the shoulder of Jon's dark jacket, telling him to shut the van off. Jon did as instructed and followed the sheriff's wild gaze to the window.

"You think it's them?", Jon asked after a long silence.

"I reckon so." came the sheriff's reply.

Jon grabbed his pistol, loaded it up, and reached for the handle of the drive's side door with the intention of getting out, and handling business. However, just as his fingers felt the hard material of the door handle, a darkened, hooded figure silently hovered past his window. He jumped back and glanced over at sheriff Kunzler. To his horror, another figure was passing by the passenger's side window also. Jon and the sheriff watched as quietly as they could as the two figures moved with ghostly calmness to the main doors of the cathedral.

"Jon," came the sheriff's voice. "I think now would be a good time as ever to make our move. We'll follow those two... hopefully they'll lead us to the rest of them bastards."

Hopefully Jon thought. "And what if they don't? What if they end up leading us into something we can't get out of?"

Sheriff Kunzler simply shook his head in disbelief at Jon, opened his door, and slid out into the night. Jon soon followed suit. He had a very awful feeling about what they were doing, but he knew that now wasn't the time for feelings and such. He knew that he would have to follow through with what he was doing if he wanted to get, or even see his son again.

The two paranoid men followed the hooded figures all the way to the entrance of the cathedral, making sure to keep themselves at a reasonable distance, as to not get themselves caught. At times, it even seemed that the hooded figures were completely deaf, because Jon had mistakenly caused some pretty noticeable noises during this venture. Sheriff Kunzler contemplated going his own way and splitting up from Jon, but he figured it be best to stay with him in case the hooded beings decided to attack. He just didn't understand why Jon's nerves were so shaky. If this was any other time, he knew Jon would be more than willing to kick ass, but tonight... tonight he actually seemed afraid. These people had his baby boy and was doing God knows what with him.... and he was afraid.

In mere moments, the two hooded figures had reached the main entrance. Jon and sheriff Kunzler quickly took cover behind a nearby wall of the large building, peeping around to keep their eyes on the "members". They watched as one of the two figures pulled out what seemed like keys, fumbled for the right one, and unlocked the large door, allowing both of them to enter. Strangely, they left the doors wide open.

"Alright," sheriff Kunzler said, making sure his gun was loaded and cocked. "Let's go in. You ready?"

No, Jon thought. "Yes." he said.

They entered the dark building. Immediately, both men were overtaken by an extreme fear. Greeting them from the inside was an incredibly long, incredibly narrow, and incredibly tall hallway. The hall was so tall in fact, that the ceiling wasn't even visible. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that it was so dark, minus the dimly lit decorative candles placed here and there. "Probably should have brought flashlights." Jon said, obviously petrified.

Disregarding Jon's comment, sheriff Kunzler held his gun out in front him like the professional he was, and proceeded into the abyss. Jon followed closely behind, but his mind wasn't allowing him to pretend to be heroic like Kunzler was. He was finally realizing the horrible reality of the task at hand. This wasn't their fight to win. They were now in the cult's domain. Hell, for all they knew, one of the cultists could have been following them this very moment, and they wouldn't even realize it because of the dark. All of these thoughts raced through Jon's mind, nearly causing him to turn around and abandon sheriff Kunzler, but it was his son that was kidnapped. What kind of a father would let fear overtake his position as a parent? A coward Jon thought. Nothing more, nothing less.

After what seemed like an eternity in hell, they had finally reached the end of the lengthy hall. However, they now stood at an an impasse. There were two other halls, one two the left, and one to the right. This would mean that, if they wanted to get anywhere, they'd have to split up, something neither of them wanted to do.

"What now?" Jon asked.

"You know damn well what," said Kunzler.

Even though Jon could barely see him through the gloom, he could tell that the sheriff was just as frustrated about this as he was. Splitting up was the worst thing that could happen, considering that they both come out of this alive.

After some thought, Jon said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Look," the sheriff began, "it may not be the popular decision, but it sure as hell is the right decision. I've come to the point where I actually have a chance to stop these bastards from causing my town any more harm. You've got the chance to get your son back. Seems to me like what's right and what's wrong is pretty obvious. So, now the choice is yours. What are you gonna do?"

Jon knew the sheriff meant well, but his gut feeling was just to blatant. Every ounce of common sense in his body was urging him to leave the cathedral, but his mind was too clouded at the moment. What would Carolyn think of him if he chose to abandon the mission? Would he be able to live with himself if he just let this go? Unintentionally cocking his gun, Jon mindlessly headed down the left hallway, alone. Nodding in approval, sheriff Kunzler made his way down the right hallway.

From the main hall that they had just come from, the real eight cultists emerged from the gloom.... watching silently. If this was the cult, then who were Jon and sheriff Kunzler pursuing?

Jon held his pistol very close to his body as he slowly crept down the hall. He didn't know where he was trying to get to, and he didn't know where he'd end up, but it didn't matter. He'd let the sheriff's talk and his own emotions get the best of him. He'd reached the point of no return. Maybe he could turn back now and tell the sheriff that he was bailing on him. Or maybe he should just shoot himself since his life was falling apart anyway. In reality, Jon did neither of these things. He simply took a deep breath and continued down the hall.

As he continued to edge closer to a non-existent end, he began hearing what he thought were..... voices. At first, they were merely whispers coming from seemingly nowhere. But as he continued on, they developed into words. Jon, however, could not understand what the words were. He couldn't make out what they were saying, and he couldn't depict where they were coming from. He gripped his gun even tighter now and pressed onward. After nearly five minutes of the eerie gloom and vacant voices, Jon had reached the end of the hallway, however, there was a closed door there to greet him. There were no windows on the door. There were only designs of the holy kind carved into the material. It sent chills down Jon's spine. As holy as these carvings and such were, the surrounding environment and situation made everything seem unholy. Jon took a slow, deep breath, looked behind him to ensure that he was not being followed or watched, then proceeded to open the door and creep inside.

Sheriff Kunzler had certainly not expected Jon to follow through with any of this. He had expected him to cower away from the dangers of the unknown, however, Jon proved that he had a set and followed through with the mission. Maybe it was because his son was still his main focus. Jon was a family man. He had a wife and two children waiting back at his house, hoping that Jacob would turn up eventually. Hoping, and praying...

Sheriff Kunzler suddenly stopped walking. The hall he'd been in had led him to a vast area. Ahead of him, there was a large window looking out at the city. The moon's eerie glow flowed into the large room with very little effect. There was a large chandelier hanging very high above him, swinging ever so slightly. The sheriff also noticed that there was another floor above, as there were railings circling high around. Beyond those railings was complete darkness. The sheriff squinted to attempt to see if anyone was standing on the railings, perhaps watching him. He couldn't tell, but he sure as hell felt like he was being watched. As the sheriff continued to examine, he noticed that there were three very wide, and very tall archways on both sides of the room. Beyond them, again, was darkness. He figured that at least one of them had to lead to a set of stairs or something. He decided to just take his chances at random, and chose the center archway on the left side of the room.

Sheriff Kunzler slowly crept into the archway. At first, his feet met nothing except normal ground. Then, after a few paces forward, he nearly tripped on the bottom step of a flight of stairs. He made his way up the stairs as quickly and carefully as he could. He had to stop on a mid-landing and locate the second set of stairs, but he managed to reach the top... almost. Standing on the landing of the the second floor was one of the hooded figures. The moonlight outlined their form, creating an image close to that of a black ghost. It was truly frightening. but nonetheless, the sheriff aimed his gun, and was ready to fire. However, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that from both sides of the ghost-like figure, the other eight “cultists” emerged, standing side by side.

The room that Jon had entered led him to a flight of stairs that circled around an area above. Without thinking, Jon jogged up the stairs and descended into the unknown. He stepped onto an area that overlooked the cathedral. He stepped closer to the railing and looked down. He noticed a large window what let a great amount of moonlight shine into the gloom. However, as he followed the lights rays with his eyes, he saw them, all eight of them, standing in the distance. They didn’t seem to notice Jon at first. He silently edged closer to them readying his gun, finger placed on the trigger. As he neared them, they seemed to be doing what Jon thought was... praying. They all had their hooded heads bowed and their hands were clasped together. As strange as it seemed, it didn’t stop Jon from continuing on.

Sheriff Kunzler didn’t understand what was going on. The “cultists” seemed to be praying from what he could tell. They all faced away from him, and it looked as if they had their heads bowed. Nonetheless, he continued to stalk the enemy. He chuckled silently to himself.

The hunters had become the... Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Jon, edging toward the “cult” with his gun ready. Seeing Jon was somewhat startling since he didn’t expect the man to be brave enough to maneuver through the cathedral alone. He kept his cool regardless. However, he attempted to get Jon’s attention, something he knew he would later regret. As he remained crouched, he tried waving his arms around in hopes that Jon would see him, but it was no use. It was too dark where he was, and the “cult” were more than likely blocking him from Jon’s view. The sheriff slowly stood up and tried moving closer to the landing without the “cult” realizing it. He soon realized just how stupid the move was once he dropped his gun. The metal clanged against the marble steps of the cathedral, breaking all silence within a one hundred foot radius. The “cult” members were startled from their prayer, jerked their heads around, and spotted both Jon and sheriff Kunzler. Jon, not wasting any time, began firing at the first signs of movement. Sheriff Kunzler quickly grabbed his pistol and did the same. One of his shots caught a “cultist” in the head, dropping them immediately. A few of the “members” attempted to escape, fleeing down the long hall. Jon shot, and killed all three of them. There were now four left. Two of the four attacked Jon, while the other two attacked sheriff Kunzler. After a brief struggle, sheriff Kunzler managed to shoot one of his attackers in the stomach. He pistol whipped the other multiple times before shoving them away and eventually shot and killed them also. He notice that Jon's two attackers were relentless and unfortunately had quite the upper

hand. Sheriff Kunzler grabbed one of them, but they lashed around and clawed at his face, creating multiple bloody cuts on his skin. Jon managed to break free from the grasp of his attacker after a frustrating struggle between the two. He turned around quickly and shot at them twice, sending them over the guard rail and onto the hard ground below. He then turned and shot the sheriff's assaulter in the back.

When the smoke eventually cleared, both men had to take a good, long breather. Everything had happened at an incredibly fast pace, and the reality of it all just hadn't settled in yet.

"I guess it was for the best after all," Jon said between gasps, "that we ended up splitting up."

"Yeah," replied sheriff Kunzler. "I guess so."

Jon now stared down at the body of the attacker he'd shot. He dropped his gun and slowly neared it.

"Careful," sheriff Kunzler told him.

But Jon wasn't listening. He didn't care about what the sheriff had to say at the moment. He just needed to know for sure that he'd killed his son's kidnappers. Once he reached the body, he kneeled down and slowly turned it over...

Sheriff Kunzler dropped his gun and backed away slowly. "Good God..."

As Jon stared down at who they'd shot, a sharp pain ran from his head, to his chest. It wasn't the cult. Jon slowly stood up. Both he and the sheriff could only stand there and stare. All of the color washed away from Jon's face. His once normal complexion was now a ghastly pale, as if life itself had been drained from his already tortured soul. They thought that they had been chasing the cult. They thought they were doing the right thing. Indeed, the supposed "cult" were wearing black robes. That was how they saw them from the back. They failed to pay attention to what they may have looked like from the front. Had they done so, they would have noticed the white wimples encircling the heads of their attackers underneath their hoods. These certainly were not druids. They were nuns.

V.

The Young And The Hopeless As it turned out, Jon's gut feeling was correct. It was one hundred percent accurate, and he should have listened to it when he had the chance. He should have talked sheriff Kunzler into leaving the cathedral when he was having doubts, but it was too late for that now. It was too late for him, and it was too late for the sheriff.

Both men had been instantly thrown in prison, and by the looks of it, they weren't going to be getting out any time soon. In fact, the townsfolk had balloted to have them serve a life's sentence, and the judge had seemingly agreed. To make matters worse, no one in Grovesford felt that Kunzler was cut out to be sheriff anymore, even after many long years of protecting the little town.

"He's just a crazy old man! Keep 'em away from us!"

"We don't need no Satanist bein' the sheriff of our town!"

"If we gotta live in a town where the Goddamned devil is the law, then we'll make sure to make 'em feel at home by makin' his life a livin' HELL!"

The distraught people of Grovesford had let their angry opinions be heard, and the town's governing body had listened and effectively answered. Kunzler was stripped of his duties as the sheriff of Grovesford. To make matters even worse, both he and Jon were ironically thrown into the very same prison that Kunzler had put the hermit into merely days before. Suddenly, all at once, it seemed that everything had blatantly fallen apart.

Jon had desperately attempted to hide the matter of him gunning down a bunch of nuns from his family, but that had miserably failed. In fact, the night after the incident, during a "family dinner", the cops had burst into his home and violently arrested him right then and there. His wife, and remaining two children were utterly petrified. It was horrible to have to go through any of that, but as bad as things seemed, they were bound to get much worse.

Carolyn had known things would continue to get worse, but she didn't ever for a second believe that her husband would be arrested for murder. Out of all the bad things that could have happened to her family, this was one of the absolute worst. It had been a few weeks after the arrest, and she, along with Jeremy and Rebecca, were still having a hard time adjusting to the severity of their situation. What would they do now? How would they survive without Jon? She didn't have a job, and she didn't know if she'd be able to get one in time for the next cycle of bills to start rolling in. However, all family issues aside, the true issue was the lingering threat that continued to haunt and watch the remaining Williams family members. The predatory cult was still very much at large, and very much alive. Not only that, but when it came to hard facts, the cult had pretty much 'won' this battle. They had fooled Kunzler and Jon into going to the cathedral, and they had led them into killing nuns. Perhaps the cult threatened the hermit and instructed him to give Jon and Kunzler false information. Regardless of what did or didn't happen, it worked, and one would believe that there was only a matter of time before they resurfaced.

"Will you tell dad that we love him?" Jeremy asked his mother.

Carolyn had decided to go and visit Jon at the Wilson Corrections Compound near the outskirts of Wilcox County, a prison similar to the Wilcox County one, but much, much larger, and with higher security levels. She had told Jeremy and Rebecca to stay in the master's bedroom until she got back, and she had given Rebecca her handgun to keep just in case.

“Of course I will.” came his mother's reply. “Just remember what I told you. If anything at all happens, call the police and get out of the house. Only use the gun if you have to sweetheart.”

After giving her children kisses goodbye, Carolyn attempted to leave through the front door. However, her emotions kept rearing their unwanted heads and she couldn't help but glance back at her children as if this would be the final time she'd ever see them. Obviously, she didn't feel at ease leaving them in the house alone, but she figured she'd take her chances.

The night skies outside were exceedingly tempestuous. The rain seemed to pour down with much more force than usual. Carolyn had to virtually rush to the van just to keep from getting completely soaked. Once she reached the van, she fumbled for a minute or two with the small ring of assorted keys before she finally found the correct one. As she took the key and began unlocking the van's door, she thought she may have heard an abrupt noise coming from the front porch of the house. It sounded to her like a slow, steady creaking. She looked over at the porch, but there were no lights on, thus meaning that she could see nothing but pitch blackness and rain droplets.

“Rebecca?” she called. No answer. “Jeremy, if you're out here, you need to get back inside the house.”

Carolyn certainly hoped that her children weren't trying to foolishly play games, especially at this time of their lives. She figured that they must have been messing with the wooden rocking chairs placed across the porch. Anyhow, Carolyn finally got around to opening the driver's side door, however, just as she placed her right foot inside, she could have sworn she heard a noise that sounded eerily like a baby's laughter nearby.

The sound caused her blood to freeze over. She slowly exited the van and blankly stared at the porch, but again, could see nothing but darkness. She contemplated going over to the porch and searching it out, but time began to become a vital factor if she wanted to see Jon anytime soon. Dismissing all of these strange happenings, Carolyn re-entered the van, and started the ignition. Before pulling off, she carefully scanned the porch once more just in case. This time, however, someone... something was staring back at her with glowing red eyes, smiling threateningly. Carolyn shuddered at the sight of this person. Their pale skin and unnaturally sinister aura about them triggered unknown fears within her convoluted mind. She rubbed her eyes and looked again, but saw nothing.

She figured and dearly hoped that her mind was playing tricks on her. She backed the van out of the driveway and pulled off, trying to forget about what she believed she saw. Unfortunately, there was someone on the porch indeed... someone holding Jacob in their arms. They stood from the rocking chair, all clad in a black hooded cloak, and watched as Carolyn drove away. Silently from behind this figure, seven others emerged and stood next to him. They had returned.

The visitation area of the Wilson Corrections Compound was hardly populated at this time of night. Aside from a few cops, a family in the corner, and Jon and Carolyn, there was no one there. It was a depressing setting for dismal people. Carolyn and Jon, however, had to be the most depressed looking pair at the compound. Carolyn's eyes were very red, as were Jon's. She had heavy bags under her eyes, and her hair wasn't exactly tidy. She looked passable at least.

Jon was visibly agitated. He looked as if he'd lost weight, but that wasn't necessarily the case. He hadn't been able to eat like he used to, and depression had sunk into his system. He sported a very prominent bristle around his chin. How much longer he could take of it, he didn't know. Whether it be death, or freedom, he just wished it would all end.

"So," Carolyn was saying as she tiredly gazed at her husband through the glass, "how's Kunzler?"

Jon managed to chuckle ever so slightly. "He's, uh... he's doing fine. Never thought that this would be the way he'd lose his job, you know?"

Carolyn managed to allow a fake smile to spread across her lips. "Jon..." she began, wanting desperately to continue with the affable small talk. Yet, she knew better than that. She had to get down to what was important. "What happened?" she asked, as all of the "happiness" dematerialized from the conversation. "What.... why.."

"We thought we had them," Jon interrupted. Carolyn continued to stare at her husband, but with profound concern. "We went to the cathedral, and..." Jon glanced behind him at the tall, burly African cop that watched him out of the corner of his beady eyes. Instead of finishing his story, Jon feebly buried his face in his hands in frustration.

There was long, awkward moment of silence that followed this. Carolyn didn't know exactly what to say next. There was nothing she could really do at this point. The end seemed to have come for their family, but why? She and Jon both shared the same ponderous query. Why?

Suddenly, the husky cop standing behind Jon spoke up. "We need to wrap this up." was all he said.

Carolyn stared up at him in utter disbelief. She didn't understand why there was no regard for human needs with the law. Dismissing the cop, Carolyn returned her attention to Jon. "Honey?" she said to him.

Jon removed his hands from his face and stared expressionlessly at his wife. "What?" he asked.

His abruptness caught Carolyn off guard for a moment, but she eventually decided to ignore it. "I think it's time we made some rational decisions." she said. "I think we need to send Jeremy and Rebecca to Miami to live with Stan."

Jon said nothing. He only blinked and continued to stare uncomprehendingly.

Considering this some form of a response, Carolyn continued. "It apparently isn't safe here. There's just too much shit happening right now, and we don't need our kids in the middle of it. You understand?"

After a few more brief moments of staring, Jon finally spoke. "I couldn't agree with you more. The kids need to be taken out of here." Tears began to form in Jon's eyes. He knew it was the right thing to do, but it wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want to be locked up away from his family, and he didn't want to be forever separated from his children. He then remembered what Kunzler had told him at the cathedral: "It may not be the popular decision, but it sure as hell is the right decision."

Carolyn attempted to hold back tears of her own, but she couldn't help it. "I know it seems bad, but we both know it's for the best."

Jon nodded, sniffled once, and stood from his chair. He placed his right hand on the glass pane. Carolyn stood and placed her left hand where Jon's was.

"Alright," the cop said. "That's enough. Time to head back to your cell Williams."

"I love you, Jon." Carolyn said.

"I love you too."

Jon began walking away, back to his cell with the cop at his side. Carolyn started to turn around and leave the facility just when she remembered what Jeremy had asked of her.

"Jon, wait!" she called. Jon stopped his pace and turned to face his wife. "Jeremy wanted me to tell you he and his sister love you."

A sad smile broke across the face of Jon Williams. "Tell them I love them too. And tell Jeremy to be strong."

With that said, Jon was escorted back to his cell as Carolyn stood there and stared at the chair he'd been sitting in. She didn't realize it, but she was slightly sobbing at this point. She couldn't help but realize that this was what her life would come to. Finally, wiping her tears from her face, she turned and left the facility.

Jeremy and Rebecca sat alone in the master's bedroom, watching an older black white horror film. Besides the bright, flickering light showering the the room, the entire house was quite dark. There were a few lamps turned on throughout the house, but other than that, the vast darkness seemed nearly overwhelming. The two children sat in their parent's bedroom, perplexed at the mind numbing television as visions of retro

monsters and screaming female actresses flashed across the screen. As natural as it all may sound, they were indeed ready in case something happened, as their mother had put it. Beside them on the carpeted floor lay two flashlights, a handgun, and a large bag of potato chips. Just as it seemed as if the night would be filled with inconsequential endeavors, an error occurred. Rebecca had to use the restroom.

"I'll be right back." she told Jeremy as she stood from the floor and headed for the door.

"Wait, where are you going?" Jeremy asked, worried.

"Calm down." Rebecca said. "I just have to use the restroom. I'll be back in like three minutes."

With that said, Rebecca stepped from the safety of the bedroom and into the dark hall. She made her way to the bathroom door, but as she placed her hand on the cold handle, she thought she saw something moving out of the corner of her eye, near the stairs down the hall. When she looked, she saw nothing. Shrugging it off, she entered the bathroom and shut the door behind her. Near the landing of the stairs, one of the cultists emerged from a hall closet. As it slowly raised its hooded head, small, crimson red, radiant eyes pierced the near pitch blackness of the atmosphere under its hood. It breathed with heavy anticipation as it sauntered down the hall to the bathroom door.

Jeremy remained in his parent's bedroom and continued to stare blankly at the television screen. His mind wasn't even working at this point, possibly due to the interesting nature of the horrors displayed upon the screen. It was down right mesmerizing. In fact, he became so delved from life, that he thought he was hearing the laughter of a baby, but that was impossible.... unless...

All of the house's power suddenly went out. All of it. The television screen Jeremy had been staring at suddenly went black. All of the lamps shut off. Jeremy now sat alone in true, real darkness. Suddenly, the noise returned, and Jeremy was quite sure that it was laughing this time. Loud laughing, like that of an infant being played with. He took a deep breath and felt around the floor for a flashlight. When his fingers wrapped themselves around one, he retrieved it and flicked the switch on. A small beam of light shot from the flashlight, barely improving the matter at all. He stood up, and examined what he could see of the room. Considering it safe, he called out his sister's name. He heard the sound of a toilet flushing in the distance, but no answer.

"Rebecca?!" he called out once again.

"What is it, Jeremy?" came the muffled reply.

"The power went out." Jeremy said.

"Yeah. What gave it away?" came his sister's smart reply.

Jeremy cautiously exited the bedroom with the flashlight and slowly walked towards the bathroom. He heard Rebecca running the water, probably trying to wash her hands. He then listened as she tried to open the door. The knob, however, refused to turn. Little did she know that one of the cultists was now somehow inside the bathroom, standing menacingly behind her as it's small red "eyes" that seemingly floated in the dark without a body silently watched her struggle.

"Dammit!" she said in frustration. "Jeremy, help me open the door! I think it's stuck!"

Jeremy tried turning the knob from the outside, but it was somehow jammed.

"It wont turn from out here either!" Jeremy called.

Rebecca banged on the door in disappointment. "Look.... just try to find a crowbar, or a hammer or something. I'll just wait in here I guess, but be quick."

"OK," Jeremy said as he slowly walked down the hall towards the stairs. As he stood on the landing, he shined the flashlight's beam down the steps. He then began hearing the laughing once again, and he was one hundred percent sure it was coming from someone in the house..... someone downstairs.

"Hello?" Jeremy called out.

"Jeremy? Who are you talking to?"

came Rebecca's worried voice from the bathroom down the hall.

Jeremy ignored her and slowly began to descend into the downstairs gloom. The further he descended, the colder it became. The young boy felt as if he were being tortured with suspense and a sickening anticipation as he cascaded deeper into the dark. What was he afraid of? It was his home.... or so he thought. A girl had been murdered here. His brother, Jacob had been kidnapped from here. Strange men had slaughtered his beloved friend Benjamin here. In fact, Jacob remembered seeing Benjamin's split body laying her at the bottom of these steps. A bloody, bloody mess it was. He recalled Benjamin's small eyes looking at him lifelessly as the doctors gathered the bodies and carried them away to be cremated. He remembered. How could he forget such a thing? It was, without a doubt, the worse moment of his life... at least up until this point.

Jeremy had now reached the bottom of the stairs. From a nearby window, a beam of moonlight shown in and faintly washed away a small amount of the dark. Jeremy now stood in the center of the patch of silvery light, hoping that his nerves would ease up knowing that he wasn't surrounded by complete darkness, but it didn't help. The sound of this strange, gentle laughing kept his nerves on edge. It kept his hair standing straight up. He was truly terrified, and he couldn't think of a worse way to spend the night.

Suddenly, a loud crashing sound came from the kitchen. It sounded like someone had dropped a glass or something. Jeremy jerked the flashlight around and tried pointing it in the direction of the kitchen, but the beam wasn't strong enough to see anything more than two, or three feet in front of him.

"Hello?" he said once again.

Jeremy dropped the flashlight by mistake due to this intense fear of his. He quickly bent down to retrieve it, however, once he straightened back up, a pair of small, red, seemingly bodiless eyes were now about five feet behind him. The intruder was unnaturally, even inhumanly silent. Jeremy's mind, nor any of his God given senses could detect its presence. The figure watched as the young, frightened boy walked slowly towards the kitchen.

Jeremy reached had finally the kitchen as far as he could tell, but he didn't notice anything broken or damaged. He continued to look around the floor for any broken glass or plates. He couldn't see anything, but he did notice that the flashlight's bulb was dying because it kept flickering repeatedly. As Jeremy remained still in the everlasting dark, it sounded to him like the laughing had ceased. He hoped that he was just imagining it, or that it was coming from outside of the house. He then took advantage of the rest of the flashlight's battery and looked around the kitchen for a tool, or anything that could help get his sister out of the bathroom. Behind him, one of the intruders silently appeared from the living room just beyond the kitchen and placed his Jon's axe against the refrigerator. Jeremy didn't notice as the red eyed figure slipped back into the living room. He did, however turn around just as the figure vanished from sight, and notice the axe with its long wooden handle and its eerily glistening blade.

Jeremy slowly neared it, but as he reached out for it, he suddenly remembered that the axe had been taken by the men that murdered Benjamin and Callie..... so how did it get there?

Jeremy slowly backed away from the tool... the weapon. It all came clear to him now... those men were in the house. Suddenly, the sound of a laughing infant filled the night's still, dead air once again. Jeremy realized with grim horror that the noise was indeed coming from the living room. Leaving the axe against the fridge, he slowly crept into the darkened living room. However, regardless if how dark it was, what he saw in the center of the room was no hallucination. Jacob was sitting on the center table, laughing uncontrollably. As Jeremy entered the room, Jacob noticed him and began laughing even harder now.

There was something that Jeremy couldn't understand. How was Jacob sitting up by himself? He was still only an infant, not a toddler. He was barely three and a half months old. What had they done to him...?

"Jacob?" Jeremy asked.

"Uh-oh," Jacob said.

Jeremy couldn't believe it. These men... these people that took Jacob had... changed him. He could talk now?

Jeremy slowly neared Jacob. He tried examining him with the small amount of light that the flashlight's beam would allow. Jacob seemed to look the same aside from the black onesie he was wearing. He seemed somehow more full of life... more active. Then, to Jeremy's astonishment, Jacob stood up, all on his own. The infant child was now standing by himself on the wooden table, watching his older brother.

"Uh-oh," Jacob said again.

Jeremy kneeled down to get a good look at Jacob's face. He then reached out and patted Jacob's soft head. He'd never thought he would ever see his brother again. Things seemed to suddenly brighten up for the Williams family. Unfortunately, all of that would die within the next few moments.

Jeremy had forgotten completely why he even came down stairs in the first place, but it didn't matter now. It was too late. His flashlight's bulb had died completely and he and Jacob were suddenly immersed within complete darkness. That's when he saw the eyes. Fourteen red eyes illuminating the dark behind Jacob. Fourteen eyes meant seven druids... where was the eight?

"Uh-oh," Jacob said one final time.

Suddenly the home's power returned to life and it's lights shot on, and Jeremy stared in horror at the seven hooded assailants standing behind Jacob. Jeremy slowly stood up... and felt a heavy, warm breathing violate the back of his neck. Gulping, Jeremy looked down at Jacob.

Jacob raised his tiny hand and waved at his brother. "Bye-bye." he said, smiling.

Jeremy turned around slowly and was just able to make out the form of the eight intruder threateningly wielding his father's axe. For a brief moment, Jeremy caught glimpse of the druid's face..... or what he thought was a face. Adding to it's deathly red, glowing eyes, the cultist's facial features mimicked that of a ghost, having unnaturally pale skin. And it was smiling as if it found something sickeningly hilarious. Nonetheless,. Jacob watched in awe as the druid viciously brought the blade of the weapon swinging heavily into the bottom of Jeremy's chin.

VI.

Breaking Point Having to stand in the rain on a dismal day and stare down at your son's headstone is an indescribable torture unlike anything ever witnessed or experienced. Carolyn Williams felt this torture now as she stood among a slew of Grovesford residents holding black umbrellas over their heads and whispering silently among themselves. The fact that Carolyn and Rebecca were the only living members of the Williams family at the funeral only worsened her spirits. It no longer mattered however. Her soul had been

forced out of her fragile body and fed to the dark and whatever lies within it. She couldn't even cry anymore. In fact, she wondered if she could even feel her despair, or any of her emotions.

Carolyn glanced over at her daughter, who was standing next to her on her left. She noticed that Rebecca was sobbing uncontrollably, and shaking violently. This was obviously too much for someone of Rebecca's age, but life doesn't guarantee happiness. It guaranteed nothing but sheer pain and agony, and the proof was now six feet under.

The Williams household may as well have been haunted. Ever since Jeremy's murder, the house has been extremely blank and empty, minus the two women that still lived their. Speaking of which, Rebecca and Carolyn have reverted into their own worlds of special solitude. Neither of them seemed to act the way they used to, but who could blame them? Their lives had been intentionally ruined by a very strange, and very random happening. What was one supposed to do in a time like this? The former police sheriff was imprisoned. Carolyn's husband was imprisoned. Jacob was kidnapped. Their dog had been killed, along with Callie. To make matters worse, if they could get any worse, Carolyn was quite sure that she was slowly descending into a very deep depression that she believed would eventually be the death of either her, or her remaining daughter.

It was a Sunday evening, two weeks following Jeremy's funeral, and Carolyn had attempted to return back to a normal life and spend some quality time with Rebecca. She figured that perhaps if she could realize that Rebecca was the only one she actually had left, maybe that reality would set in and put sense back into her mind. Lord knew she needed it, and fast. Anyhow, Carolyn had invited Rebecca in the home's family room to watch a movie with her. She thought this would be the best way to 'bond'.

About forty-five minute into the film, Carolyn decided to actually speak to her daughter. What she said, however, was not what she had intended.

"I don't think we can last much longer." Carolyn said this with a very blank expression. As Rebecca glanced over at her mother, she became suddenly frightened and cold.

"What?" was Rebecca's response to her mother's strange words.

Carolyn let out a long sigh before saying, "Honey, I am going to be..... realistic with you. I don't think that I can go back to work after... all this. I think that we are eventually going to have to find a new home for you."

Rebecca thought deep into this before she responded. She sort of understood the part about having to send her to live with someone else, but if her mother wasn't willing to return to the work force, then what in the hell was she talking about? "Mom, I..." Rebecca began, but didn't know how to finish exactly.

“Don’t worry about me, Rebecca. I’ll be just find. Don’t worry.”

Rebecca slowly stood from the sofa and stared at her mother. As she examined her, she realized that she didn’t even look human anymore. Her once attractive complexion had faded away, leaving behind a ghoulish pale color. Her hair seemed to have lost most of its color as well. There were very prominent shadows under her eyes, and she had lost a considerable amount of weight since this whole dilemma began. Rebecca the examined the living room. This was where Callie and Jacob were when they attacked first. Beyond this room, Benjamin was slain, and blood had once covered the walls. Rebecca shuddered in fear as she wondered of Callie’s soul would forever haunt the premises for as long as it stands.

“Come here, darling” Carolyn’s sudden words startled Rebecca out of her train of thought. “Come here and give your mother a hug.”

Rebecca didn’t want to be near her mother, or in the same room as her. She just wanted sanity. “Mom, I think I’m gonna go take a walk. I need the fresh air.”

As Rebecca attempted to exit out of the family room, Carolyn quickly stood from the sofa and blocked her daughter’s path to the door. Rebecca attempted to walk around her mother, but Carolyn kept blocking her way. Rebecca didn’t understand why this was happening, but she damn sure was frightened.

“Mom, what are you doing?” she asked.

Carolyn’s face now displayed a very clear emotion. It displayed anger. “So, you need the fresh air, huh?”

Rebecca opened her mouth to say something, but what came out was nothing at all.

“What’s wrong with just spending some quality time with your mother, huh?! Is there something wrong with me in your eyes? Is mama acting a little crazy for ya?!”

Rebecca slowly began to back away from what she thought was her mother. She was able to take merely two small steps backward before Carolyn violently struck her daughter with incredible force. The strike caused Rebecca to stumble back in both pain and fear. Tears began to quickly build up in her eyes.

“Why don’t you want to be with me, Rebecca? What have I done to make things so distant between us?! We can still be a family!”

Rebecca recovered from the strike as quickly as she could and ran out of the living room. Carolyn was very quick to chase her.

Rebecca attempted to run into her bedroom, but the door wouldn’t open fast enough for her tastes, and she ended up running into the master bedroom. She tried o close the door behind her, but Carolyn was far too

quick and burst into the room. Rebecca cowered into a corner and crouched there, sobbing at the insanity of the situation at hand. Her mother at apparently lost her mind and was trying to hurt her.

Carolyn stared at her daughter from across the room. She then smiled weakly.

“It never had to be this way, Rebecca. It never had to be this way.”

“Why are you talking to me like it's my fault everyone is dying!?” Rebecca screamed between sobs.

Carolyn's face suddenly expressed a very insane look. “You were the one who was supposed to be watching Jeremy that day. You son of a bitch! You were responsible for the death of my goddamn son, and you are the reason that I'm like this! It is your fault! It's your fault, yet you don't feel the least bit guilty!”

Rebecca's sobs worsened now. “Mom, I never-”

“Shut up!” Carolyn threw a lamp across the room. It landed mere inches away from Rebecca's head. “Don't you ever call me mom ever again! Ever! You're not my daughter. You're a damn child of Satan!”

Rebecca watched as her mother walked over to a little locked drawer. The same drawer that contained her handgun. She watched as Carolyn unlocked the drawer and retrieved the weapon. Carolyn held the gun in trembling hands. She checked to make sure it was loaded, then she turned and pointed the gun at Rebecca.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn't blow your fucking head off of your shoulders, witch.”

“Mom, please, I-”

Carolyn fired the gun. She intentionally missed Rebecca, as to scare her. “I thought I told you not to call me that anymore!”

Rebecca's face was reddened now from the extensive sobbing she was doing. Her makeup was running and she was trembling with intense fear. She held up her hands and begged her mother to not kill her. She begged, and prayed.

“It never had to be this way, Rebecca. You could have just died with Jeremy. At least then I wouldn't have to waste my time killing you!”

Rebecca glanced around the room for anything she could find that would assist her in getting out of this situation. Near her to the left was a small table. On it were various family photographs. One of them had Jeremy's smiling face on it. Rebecca slowly reached over and retrieved the photo of Jeremy from the table. She then held it up so that her mother could see it. “I'm sorry.” she said.

“Put that down.” Carolyn demanded as she slowly neared her daughter.

“It wasn’t my fault. I went into the bathroom when the power went out. I was trapped in there..... the door wouldn’t open.... mom, I swear...”

Slight tears began to form in Carolyn’s eyes. “I said put it down!”

Rebecca slowly stood up with the picture. “If I could have escaped the bathroom in time, I would have sacrificed my life for Jeremy. I still wish that it was me instead of him mom. Please, you’re not the only one bothered by this.”

Carolyn began to lower the gun, as her tears began to show themselves. It was as if all of the common sense and reasoning had abruptly returned to her. Immediately, she was devastated by what she had just done. She too began to sob. Rebecca slowly took the gun from her mother’s hands and tossed it to the ground. The two of them stood there for a brief moment, attempting to recreate some sort of family bond with what was left of their family. Rebecca, now considering it safe, finally gave her mother that hug she wanted.

The once domestic environment that the Williams family once exhibited was now tarnished inevitably. However, the bond of love for one another never left, and somehow they continued to remain at peace amongst themselves. This was especially shown when Rebecca was actually able to forgive her mother for her wrongdoings and go on living a somewhat “normal” life. Rebecca new very well that soon, very soon, she would have to part with her mother and leave everything she knew and loved behind, perhaps forever. It didn’t upset her, however. She was forced to mature at a rapid pace now, and she knew that it was for the best.

Carolyn, deeming her self sane enough for the rest of the world, had decided to finally give Jon the news of Jeremy’s murder. She was now cruising along a calm road, heading toward the Wilson Corrections Compound. This ride was just what she needed to allow herself to think and free her mind of any stress that related to the lingering threat that continued to lurk about within the shadows of her every nightmare. It seemed, however, that every time she so much as blinked, she was terrorized with the horrible sight of demonic black ghosts. These thoughts and such began to prove to be too much for her fragile nature, nearly causing her to have two separate car wrecks, one in which she nearly ran off the road, and another in which she nearly crashed into an oncoming semi truck. The second wreck scared her enough to where it shook her awake and allowed her to thoroughly focus on the long road.

With time, Carolyn eventually made it to the compound in which her husband, considering that he was still alive, was waiting. She found a parking spot away from the rest of the cars and gingerly strode into the compound. After doing the routine visitors deal, Carolyn and Jon were once again face to face inside the visitation area, with only a thin sheet of see through glass between them.

“It’s been a little while.” Jon smiled and examined his wife, noting that she didn’t not look any better than the last time she had visited him.

Carolyn sighed. “Yeah, it has, hasn't it?” She couldn't summon any way to begin to explain to Jon that his son had been killed.

“So, how's Jeremy and Rebecca?” Jon suddenly asked.

Carolyn attempted to look at him without appearing bothered or troubled, but that was quite harder than she thought it'd be.

Jon noticed her concern immediately, like any good husband should, and began to question it. “You okay? You look bothered. Did something happen?”

Carolyn eventually broke and began crying softly. She just couldn't face the realization of any of it. It was far too much for someone of her nature to have to deal with, and now she was forced to sit here in a compound and tell her imprisoned husband that his son was murdered. If she had a gun, or any weapon with her, she would have gladly committed suicide right then and there.

“Carolyn,” Jon said, “please tell me what's wrong. You know you can tell me anything.”

The cop that was standing behind Jon, the one that was there last time, glanced down at the troubled couple, cleared his throat, and said, “I'm going to go ahead and leave you two alone. If you folks need anything, just holler.”

Carolyn waited for the cop to leave before she decided to go ahead and tell the tale. “Jeremy is dead, Jon.” Her crying escalated into sobs.

Jon's facial expression of worry ever left. It as as if he was suddenly frozen with shock. However, at the same time, he expected to hear something like this. He didn't, however, expect to hear what Carolyn had to say next.

“Jon, I don't know what to do anymore. I've been so negatively affected by all of this and.... Jon, I put a gun up to Rebecca and blamed on her ..”

Now, Jon's facial expression changed. He stared at his wife in utter disbelief. He was hoping that all of this was a dream...a nightmare even, and that he would soon be shaken awake by one of his children. He knew better, though. He knew better. In knowing better, Jon stood from his seat and continued to stare at his wife... or at the woman he thought was his wife.

Carolyn reached into her purse and retrieved a photo of Jeremy and Rebecca and slid it under through the little hole in the glass to Jon. “I'm sorry, Jon. I never should have left them at he house that night...” With her ongoing sobs, Jon could barely understand what she was saying. He didn't care anyway. Jeremy had died, and he was just finding out. Carolyn had blamed Rebecca for it. And now, she is telling him that she

threatened to kill Rebecca. All of this was making Jon's hands tremble in what could have been fear, rage, despair, shock, or a mix of every unbalanced emotion.

Jon then did something that he figured he'd never have to ever do. He slowly took a deep breath and took the photo of his children and placed it into the pocket of his prison suit. Then, he took a step back and stared at his wife once more. Finally, letting out a loud yell of frustration, he launched forward and sent his right fist through the thin glass screen, shattering the whole thing and possibly breaking a knuckle or two. Carolyn attempted to duck away from him, but he grabbed her by the hair and attempted to pull her onto the other side. They struggled back and forth for quite some time, and Carolyn was sure that she was losing a good bit of her hair. In fact, her head may have well been bleeding now. Jon began foaming from the mouth as he tried to bring his wife over the edge. The only intention he had as of right now was to beat her senseless. Carolyn was screaming as loud as she could during this whole episode while a couple of cops came in and sent two stun guns into Jon's sides, nearly crippling him immediately. Jon was sent to the floor in a 'shocking' fashion. The two cops hauled him up while Carolyn recovered and stared in disbelief.

As the cops pulled Jon away, he glared back at Carolyn, red faced and sweaty, and screamed, "Putting a gun to my daughter's head is your way of being a supportive parent?! Fuck you, I hope they get you next! I hope they get you next!!!"

The very moment that Carolyn returned home from the compound, she contacted Stan and discussed the matter of him coming to get Rebecca and take her to live down in Miami with him. She just had to get rid of all the burdens of her life. She didn't particularly believe that Rebecca was a burden, but she knew that if she kept Rebecca around Grovesford to much longer, one of them would be killed. Carolyn just believed that it'd be better to sacrifice herself to these people before they could get to Rebecca... if they even wanted her. She hoped and prayed to God that they would just stay away now, but Satan kept on whispering in her ear that they will be back again, and again.... and again....

Two days following Carolyn's call, Stan had made it a goal to rush over to Alabama as quickly as he could to get Rebecca and perhaps help Carolyn out a little. He had gotten there in the late evening, and Rebecca had all of her belongings packed and ready to go. Her emotions, however, were a mess.

"I love you, sweetheart," Carolyn said as she held Rebecca close to her and gave her one final hug. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, mom." It was difficult to do this type of thing, but what had to be done simply had to be done. This was a must if either of them wanted to grow old one day. Carolyn knew that they were lurking about every second of every day, but she was confident in the decision to split the family up. John was in prison, Rebecca would be in Miami soon, and everything was just right. Everything will be just fine, is what she thought. She was wrong.

After spending nearly an eternity saying goodbyes and whatnot, Rebecca and Stan were just about to head out of the door. However, before Rebecca stepped outside, she turned and asked her mother one final question.

“Do you think I’ll be able to see dad once before I go?”

Carolyn sighed deeply. “They don’t let children enter the compound, honey. Unless you feel like getting in trouble with the police, it’d be best to know that he loves you as I, and as Jeremy.”

Rebecca forced a smile to display on her face, even though she felt even worse now. For all she knew, she would never even see her father ever again. Finally, she waved and kissed goodbye to her mother and let Stan take her luggage and lead her to his rental car. Carolyn watch with intense pain as Rebecca, her only daughter, got into the car, buckled up, and prepared to drive off in safety. Stan then hollered a goodbye towards Carolyn before getting into the car. As he started the engine, Rebecca rolled down her window and continued to wave goodbye to her mother. Her face was wet with her tears, and her makeup was running once again. This, in turn, caused Carolyn to begin sobbing. From within the car, Stan kept asking Rebecca if she wanted to just wait a little while and have him come back a later time, but Rebecca was grown enough to realize that she didn’t have a choice. She had to get the hell out of Grovesford. After assuring that Carolyn and Rebecca had thoroughly gathered themselves, Stan drove off, and Rebecca was safe.

Carolyn, on the other hand, was not. In fact, they had been watching Rebecca and Stan drive off. Now, they were inside the house, and Carolyn was oblivious. As Stan's rental disappeared into the dark evening, Carolyn sighed once again and wiped the tears form her face. She stared up to the darkening sky and closed her eyes to pray to God.

“Please, God, please just let it all end tonight. It's over now. Let me be at peace from the sinners, please.” She then opened her eyes, felt a gust of cold wind, and walked back into the dark house, shutting and locking the front door behind her.

The first thing that Carolyn noticed was that the light switch next to the front door wouldn’t turn any light's on. She figured that, somehow, the power had gone out, but it wasn’t storming out or anything.

“Must be the power lines.” she whispered to herself.

Carolyn knew better than to really think that it was the “power lines”, or any other mishap. She knew what it was.... or who it was. She wasn’t afraid either. She had expected this to happen some way or another. Maybe she didn’t expect it to happen so soon, but it didn’t matter because here it was. Satan was right and death was afoot.

Carolyn began to creep forward, hoping to be able to maneuver throughout her home without any problems. She peered forward and out into the backyard but the only thing she noticed were the tree leaves moving ever so slightly in the wind. Carolyn then insisted upon herself to go upstairs, and retrieve the gun that she

had hidden in the dresser. As she made her way over to the staircase however, she thought she noticed a small pair of red, glowing “eyes” peering down at her from upstairs, but when she looked, she saw nothing but darkness.

A sick thought soon entered Carolyn’s mind. She thought of Jeremy, attempting to maneuver through the house and eventually getting strangled to death by one of the demon-men. She had to quickly dismiss the thought if she wanted to get out of this situation alive. After clearing her mind and building up confidence with deep breaths, she slowly ascended into the dark.

As he reached the halfway point of the staircase, one of the eight satanists crossed snuck past her into the kitchen below. It was so silent with it's unnatural movements, that Carolyn didn’t even hear it. Perhaps she was just too focused on getting the gun and getting out of the house. She finally reached the landing and quickly jogged over to the door of the master bedroom. However, even through the thick darkness, she was able to make out, with horror, the object that protruded from the center. It was Jon’s axe.

Carolyn slowly pushed the door open and cautiously stepped into the bedroom. It was destroyed. The bed was broken in half, and everything was thrown across the floor. She looked around noticed that the dresser that once contained her hand gun had been crushed to pieces. Strangely, the only thing that was left alone was a small plant that sat on a nightstand next the damaged master bed.

Carolyn didn’t know whether or not the gun was still in the room, but she figured she didn’t have the time to plunder through things. These people were obviously pissed.

She quickly exited the room and closed the door, however, the axe was now gone.

“Dammit!” she said with growing frustration.

It was quite clear now that she had no advantage whatsoever over these people. They had the gun, and the axe, and all she had were more problems at hand. The only option left was to get out of the house, and that's just what she tried to do.

Carolyn ran down the stairs and attempted to head for the doorway, however, she was abruptly greeted by a small pair of red, glowing eyes. One of them was blocking her from the doorway, hulking there in it's demonic form. It was over. She didn’t believe that she had a chance to live, or even think about living now. Withal, there was still the back door. Carolyn took her chances and ran for it. She quickly unlocked the glass door and sprinted to the outside. Perhaps if she had done a bit of rational thinking and preparation, she would have perceived the axe sticking out of the ground, and she wouldn’t have tripped over it. All the same, she didn’t see it, and she did trip over it.

Carolyn believed that she had possibly sprained her wrist or leg or something, but she couldn’t tell. All she knew now was that it was her own fault that she was probably going to die. After a brief moment of gathering herself, Carolyn finally stood from the fall and brushed herself off. However, as if they had literally been incarnated from the dark, the eight satanists were now standing in a slightly spread out circle,

surrounding her. Carolyn's heart was racing extremely fast now. She didn't know what to do, and there was nowhere to go. Considering this her final stand, she examined the druids from head to foot. There was nothing particularly special about their hooded cloaks. However, the druids themselves were all quite thin, and somewhat tall. Carolyn looked at one of them and was able to see their complexion thanks to the moonlight. Their skin was a very ghoulish, grey color, as if they had never seen the sunlight. Regardless, they did appear to be human to her, minus the face that each of their eyes were a bright, glowing red color. She also noticed that all of their hands were gloved. This must have been to prevent them from leaving behind any fingerprints.

"Who are you?" Carolyn asked, just as it began to rain.

In response, one of the druids surprised her and tossed her gun towards her. It landed just in front of her feet. Carolyn looked down at the weapon, then glanced back up at all eight of them. This wasn't something she was expecting. She slowly bent down to retrieve it. She checked to see if they were fooling her, or if they had emptied out all of the ammunition. Yet, the weapon was loaded. Carolyn glanced around at the eight men one more time, but neither of them moved, or flinched. They just stared... and waited.

Here she was, thinking that they were going to kill her. She thought that it was all over. But these people had actually given her a loaded gun as they surrounded her. It was strange, but if it meant that she would continue to live, then so be it. She held the gun out and pointed it at the cult member that had tossed it to her. However, the realization had set in. Did she want to kill them? Who would she go home to once they were all dead? Rebecca was with Stan now, and Jon was locked up. Jeremy... well, Jeremy was dead. He was dead... and it angered her.

Carolyn cocked the gun at the druid and gripped it with adrenaline flowing through her veins. However, the druid didn't look afraid or nervous. It was smiling. All of her rage and emotion suddenly left her body. What would be the point in killing them? If they died, what would happen to Jacob? If she thought that her life was bad now, how would she be able to live the rest of it as the wife of an imprisoned criminal, and a murderer?

"Why?" she asked as tears began rolling down her cheeks. "Why?"

The druid continued to stare hard

into Carolyn's eyes. She attempted to read its expression. Its eyes were burning with an incredibly violent hatred, yet, its lips displayed a "friendly", yet sickening smile. Carolyn had had enough. She looked up to the sky, slowly pointed the gun towards her skull, and just as a flash of lightning lit the stormy night and thunder rolled across the sky, she pulled the trigger. They knew it would happen this way. They knew that Carolyn would commit suicide. She wasn't strong enough to continue living. She was just as weak as everyone else. Four of the eight druids then proceeded to gather her body, and hoist it up on their shoulders. The raindrops seem to fall in slow motion as they splashed upon her now lifeless form. The druid that gave

Carolyn the gun picked it up from the ground and placed it within his cloak. He then took the axe out of the mud, held it over his shoulder, and led the entire cult away into the dark.

VII.

Mad House The inevitable that tensions were indeed rising throughout Grovesford was quite apparent. Police officials were having a tough time keeping their investigations on the low due to the local residents being all too curious. Especially the residents around the Williams home. Many people began to question the strange, yet sudden disappearance of Carolyn Williams, but no one had a clue what had happened. Some suggested that she had gone insane and ran off. Some figured that she was just hiding somewhere. Others speculated that she was dead somehow. Either way, the cops had no leads, and the entire case, including the search, was closed and called off. The disappearance of Carolyn Williams will go forever unsolved.

The night skies of Grovesford were once again burned with the intense hatred of yet another of mother nature's powerful storms. It was as if the sudden unknown threat that continued to wonder about without so much as a trace of its presence was causing an unnatural unbalance of the weather. No one within the town's small boundaries was looking too much into the weather, as most of them were attempting to focus on keeping their families safe. Safety seemed to play a much larger part in the lives of the town's residents these days. Gone were the calm days where you could leave your front door unlocked. Gone were the days where you could walk down a street and not have to worry about being jumped. Gone were the times of innocence.

The Wilson Corrections Compound stood eerily among a slew of dying trees as the night skies above it were abused with intense flashes of lightning and disturbed with loud bellows of thunder. Its many inmates had the pleasure of not having to hear the angry storm due to the facility's thick walls, but that was about the only comfort they had. There was an otherwise dead feeling within the facility. Over the past few days, less and less visitation went on, and some of the inmates began to go into very serious depressions. One could only imagine what was going on inside their minds.

Cell A78 held a weary Jon Williams, a defeated Matthew Kunzler, and the former cultist-hermit, three men that didn't quite need to be locked up to begin with. Jon felt that his actions towards his wife when she last visited him were highly inexcusable and probably unnecessary. He felt as though he overreacted about something he didn't take the time to look into. He should have let her explain the situation more. Guilt was a damned thing. A damned thing it was, and Jon knew that more than anyone.

Kunzler was still getting over the fact that he was no longer the sheriff of police. It was something that he had been doing for so long, and just like that, he was stripped of his merit. Ironically enough, he had ended up locked up for committing a crime of his very own. Of course, Jon was his accomplice, nevertheless, he

shared a good bit of the blame. Kunzler didn't even have that large of a duty withhold with this small town. All he had to do was make sure that things stayed sane and in order but do to the threat of a satanic cult that shared a history of unknown proportions, he was forced to shoot at anything wearing a black hooded robe, and he paid for it.

It wasn't until the clock struck

midnight that they decided to get the hell out of hell. The guards were less aware at this hour, and the majority of the other inmates had fallen asleep. They had planned their escape thoroughly, and they were now ready to execute it, even with the help of the hermit. Jon and Kunzler were going to escape the Wilson Corrections Compound, or die trying.

Figuring that they'd take their chances, Jon and Kunzler forced the hermit to assist them in escaping, but did not intend on having him come with them. They decided to leave it up to him to decide what he was gonna do afterwards. In reality, it wasn't up to the hermit. Jon had actually threatened the man's life in order to get him to comply to the plan, a questionable move which turned out for the best. Jon, however, should have known better to trust an ex criminal. Who knew what would happen. If and when the cult showed up, who would save them if the hermit decided to turn against them?

Apparently, thinking critically was the difference between life and death at this point. All three men stood in their darkened cell and watched closely as the final few guards passed by. As the very last guard made his way slowly pass the cell, the hermit made his move. He slowly and sneakily forced his skinny hand through the bars and unhooked the man's keys from his pants, all the while making sure not to get caught. The guard continued walking obliviously, however, that was perhaps due to the fact that he could not see them through the thick darkness that washed over their cell.

After waiting for the guards to vanish down the hall, the hermit attempted to unlock the cell door, only to be knocked aside by a very eager Jon Williams.

"Give me the damn keys," Jon demanded.

The hermit looked over at Jon in fear. Half of Jon's face was covered in complete shadows, but the other half eerily pierced the quiet sanity due to the dimly lit hallway lights. He looked mad, insane, and crazed all rolled up into one. The hermit then glanced over his shoulder at Kunzler, but all he could see was the outline of the man's bone-thin figure.

"Just give him the keys." Kunzler said in an uncomfortably calm voice.

Reluctantly, the hermit tossed Jon the keys.

“You guys aren't gonna leave me here, are you?” he asked, but Jon had already unlocked the cell and was on his way out.

Behind him, Kunzler stepped out of the shadows with a twisted grin on his old face. “Of course we ain't gonna leave you here!” he bellowed. “We need you to bait the guards away.” With that said, Kunzler grabbed the hermit and pulled him along.

As all three men stood in the hallway, inmates in nearby cells noticed their behavior and began to stir. One of the inmates located in a cell just beyond them saw them and extended his hand in an unnervingly helpless manner.

“Don't leave me here,” he told them. “I've been here for thirty long years. I don't want to die. I don't want to die here.”

Jon stared down at the man's skinny, broken looking hand. He was missing his middle finger and thumbs. Perhaps they were severed in form of punishment. Or perhaps he lost them some other way...

“Sorry.” Jon said as he stared into the man's cell, trying to see him among the deep shadows. “No dead weight. Can't run the risk.”

Jon gave the man one last sorrowful look, then proceeded on down the hall. As he passed the man's cell, he found himself caught. He looked down at his sleeve and noticed that the man had grabbed hold of his clothes with a trembling, desperate hand.

“Please,” he said. “I want to live.”

Jon jerked his sleeve away. He stared into the man's eyes for a moment. He saw a sad story full of pain and agony. But he didn't care. He didn't give a damn about this man's life, or what he wanted. All Jon Williams cared about right now was retribution. After letting his thoughts bleed through, Jon looked away from the pathetic man inside the cell and motioned for Kunzler and the hermit to follow him. Deep down inside, Jon knew that he was leaving that man to die. When it came to facts, Jon just didn't give a damn.

Moments later, all three escapees had reached the end of the dimly lit, grimy hall. They had come to a stop at a white pair of locked double doors. Jon peeked through the little dirty windows and noticed that the doors led to a small room in which a single guard sat at a desk, sleeping. The only light on in the room was a lamp placed on the desk.

The hermit peeked through the windows and noticed the dilemma.

“How are we gonna get pass the guards again?” he asked.

He barely had enough time to complete his sentence as Jon immediately sent his bare fist through one of the glass windows of the double doors.

“We aren't doing shit. You are gonna distract all of the guards in this facility. Make sure that they stay away from us at all times, got it?” Jon told the hermit.

The hermit looked through the broken window and noticed that the guard was surprisingly still asleep, despite the loud sound of shattering glass. He knew what was going on. He knew all too well. Jon and Kunzler were just going to use him for their own sick benefit. They didn't care whether or not he got out alive. They simply cared only for themselves. However, a sudden thought occurred to the hermit, and he eventually agreed to Jon's “plan.”

Jon reached through the hole where he had punched through the glass and opened the door from its other side. He allowed the hermit to sneak into the room. Then, seeing to it that the hermit knew what he was supposed to do, Jon and Kunzler made their way down the hall the opposite direction... towards the main entrance/exit areas of the facility.

Jon and the former sheriff weren't even halfway down the grim, cold hall when things went wrong. They soon heard sounds..... terrible, bloodcurdling noises like horrified shrieks of terror from some unfortunate victims of a sadistic attack. Unfortunately, they knew what had happened. The cult must have finally found them. This brave escapade had just quickly turned into a death maze, and the two experiments were heavily outnumbered. It was only a matter of time.

“What do you think happened to the hermit?” Kunzler asked.

“I don't care what happened to him. If what we just heard was any indication, then we need to get the hell out of here before it's too late.”

Jon glanced over his shoulder at the double doors that they had led the hermit into, and to his unfortunate horror, he noticed a small, radiant pair of red eyes glaring back at him through the broken window. He and Kunzler didn't have to wait to discover what happened next. They both ran down the hall and, to their frustration, encountered another set of double doors. These, however, were unlocked. They burst through the doors and had to maneuver around carefully because the area they'd entered was even more dimly lit than the hall. In fact, it was almost as if there were no lights on at all.

“The guards,” Kunzler said between rasping breaths. “What do you think happened to em?”

Jon chuckled. “You know as damn well as I do...” he then pointed to something laying on the floor just ahead of them. It was the body of a guard, broken and lifeless.

Kunzler opened his mouth to say something else, but an abrupt and sudden blindside stopped him. From a nearby window that looked out at the facility's grassy grounds, one of the druids burst through and knocked

Kunzler to the ground with incredible force. Jon stumbled back in terror as he watched the two wrestle around a bit before Kunzler managed to escape. The former sheriff stood quickly from the brief scuffle and hollered at Jon to run, but it was too late. From the double doors they had entered, three more druids burst through and knocked Jon to the ground. As he fell, Jon noticed that Kunzler was running away, but he didn't get a chance to see where. Luckily enough for him, the druids were too caught up in the moment to mind him any longer. They focused their attention on the fleeing Kunzler and chased after him, allowing Jon to recover. Immediately, Jon headed for the broken window that one of the druids had entered through. He had half a mind to just leave right then and there, but he realized that he and Kunzler had been through too much already. He had to make sure that the both of them got out of there alive.

Instead of just running around in the dark like a madman, Jon decided to see if he could possibly find a flashlight, or a weapon, or both. He examined the area in which he now stood, alone and very much afraid. With what the dim lighting allowed, Jon could see that this area must have been some sort of storage room. There were a few lockers on either side of the walls, and beyond those was a medium sized oak wood desk. Jon slowly walked over to the desk and examined the things that lay upon it. He noticed a few files and other forms of paper work, but eventually deemed them useless. Before giving up hope, something else on the desk caught his eye. Laying on the corner was an all black military handgun, fully loaded and equipped with a flashlight. Jon retrieved the weapon and turned the flashlight on. It helped, but only so much so. The dark was still overpowering, but he figured that the weapon and the flashlight would give him enough leverage to locate, and possibly rescue Kunzler.

Matthew Kunzler had been running for dear life for about five minutes now, and he had no intention on stopping anytime soon. However, once he glanced behind him and saw that he was no longer being chased, he decided to halt his pace and think about what his next move would be. It was a frustrating situation indeed since he didn't know whether or not Jon was dead, unconscious, or had escaped. He hoped that Jon didn't escape... without him at least. However, he also hoped that Jon wasn't dead or unconscious. Dismissing such thoughts, Kunzler looked around at where he was, and to his dismay, he found himself in yet another hallway. He knew that the facility was quite large, but never did he once expect it to be this difficult to maneuver through. Not once during his line of police work did he ever have to come here for any reason. He was always told to stay around the Grovesford area. Nonetheless, he was here now, and if he wouldn't be able to escape alive, then he wouldn't be escaping at all.

Kunzler began slowly walking down the long hall. He expected there to be another set of double doors at the end, but he was wrong. At the end of the hall was the entrance to the visitation area. With a new found hope, Kunzler examined the area, which wasn't much brighter than any of the other parts of the large facility. The first thing that he noticed were the many bodies that lay scattered about the floor. It was a grisly sight indeed, and it made the few hairs on Kunzler's head stand up on end. What made it all the worse was the fact that all of these bodies, some inmates and some guards, had petrified looks on their faces as if the last thing they did before they died was scream in terror.

Kunzler tried his best to ignore all of this, but it was too much to take in. The smell, sight, and feel of it was absolutely horrid. Then, summoning up his bravery, Kunzler made his way past all of the bodies and blood and walked over to the visitation glass, the same glass that Jon broke days back. Just beyond the glass was the exit. This was a very risky endeavor for Kunzler, because if he wanted to leave the facility right now, he'd have to break the glass again, and risk having the cult members hear him. Finally, after taking a deep breath, Kunzler picked up one of the bloody chairs that inmates used when having visitors, and flung it through the thin glass panel. He then cautiously climbed over onto the other side. Something felt wrong still. There was an unrest about the atmosphere, as if one of these "dead" bodies..... wasn't really dead at all. Kunzler slowly looked behind him at the bodies and bloody floor tiles and walls, but everything about this unholy area seemed very much destroyed, including the bodies. He figured that some sort of strange paranoia was overcoming him, and he wasn't going to have that. He wasn't going to be afraid now. No, not now. Not ever. Kunzler made two small steps toward the exit, but stopped immediately because he was damn sure he heard a slight shuffling noise. He jerked his head around the room at the bodies and what not once more, but noticed nothing too peculiar. That is, until he saw one of the inmate's bodies sitting in a chair just to the right of him. The body's head was leaning slightly to the side, but there was no doubt in hell that it's eyes were fixed directly on Kunzler. The former sheriff decided to test this madness, and moved slowly just to see if the eyes would follow him..... and they did. Shortly after that, a sick, unnerving, nightmarish smile broke across the face of this "body", and Kunzler nearly had a heart attack. He tried to just run for the exit, but the spooks weren't over yet. As soon as he made the move to run, a druid, playing possum on the floor below him, sprung up like a predator with unnatural speed, and forcefully attacked its prey.

Jon knew well enough that this was just a sick game of cat and mouse. He and Kunzler weren't going to get out of this mad house, and he knew it. The cult would have their heads hung from the ceiling. Jon didn't even know why he was still even trying to win. He didn't even know why exactly he chose to come back looking for Kunzler. The old man was more than likely long dead by this point, and if Jon wasn't careful, he'd end up the same way. Sometimes, however, Jon wondered if death itself would be better than dealing with the situation he was now facing.

Right about now, Jon was feeling as if he couldn't be more lost. He didn't know where in the hell he was, or how in the hell he'd gotten there. The flashlight he was holding out in front of him would only allow so much to be seen in this dark, grimy environment. The walls were narrow, and there weren't any visible doors nearby.... he figured he must, yet again, be in another hallway. This hall must have been rarely used, because the once white paint on the walls was peeling off and was turning some sickish faint green color. The floor was made of tile, but it was cracked horrendously and there were all sorts of "surprises" scattered about. Ignoring all of these atrocities, Jon continued to edge slowly and carefully down the hall until he noticed that there were luminescent lights hanging from the ceiling just a few feet in front of him. He clicked the flashlight off and placed it in his pocket as he picked up his walking pace a bit.

After about three or so more minutes of careful sneaking, hope made itself known. Just up ahead of the weary Jon Williams was an “intersection” of hallways. This was both good and bad news, but Jon could care less about the bad. For all he knew, the worse that would happen is that he would take the wrong direction and end up at another intersection. Once he reached the intersection, Jon noticed that there were no lights lighting either path. He slowly pulled the flashlight out of his pocket and flicked the switch to 'on'. First he shined it down the left hall. He saw nothing but darkness, but he noticed that the hall curved away, unlike the other straight ones. He then shined the light down the hall straight in front of him. He again saw nothing special, but perhaps that was for the best. He'd rather see nothing good than something bad. Finally, he turned the light to the hall to his right. The flashlight revealed the man that had begged Jon to help him earlier sitting in an old wheelchair in the dark entrance of the hallway, missing an eye..... and half of his face. Jon thought the man looked broken earlier, but this was wrong in the darkest of ways.

“My God..” was all Jon could manage to say.

The man attempted to speak with what was left of his mouth, but all that came out was a long, burbling stream of crimson blood. Jon, now horrified beyond belief, attempted to back away from the wicked sight, but instead backed right into someone else. For all that was holy, he hoped that it was Kunzler, dead or alive, that he'd backed into. When he turned around to find out, however, he was mistaken. Instead of Kunzler, Jon was now looking up with fear into the glowing, red, demonic eyes of one of the druid cult members. Jon slowly raised the flashlight up and shined it in the druid's face. What he saw was damn near worse than any man in a wheelchair throwing up blood. Half of this druid's face was nothing but bare skull. The other half looked burned and inhumanly molten. Jon had planned to run, but the druid, moving incredibly fast, knocked the flashlight out of Jon's hand and struck him with so much force that it knocked him a good three feet away. Jon did the best he could to get up and run. He didn't know or even care which hall he'd run down, but he did know that he had to get out of the facility with or without Kunzler.

Apparently, there was some major faulty electric wiring going on inside the facility. The lights in the hall he'd run down kept switching off for a second or two, then back on again repeatedly. He bravely glanced over his shoulder to see if the druid was keeping up, and to his dismay, it was. The druid had violently rushed into the hall that Jon had run into and was now sprinting like some rabid beast toward the frightened man. Every time the lights went out and came back on again, it seemed as if the horrifyingly demon like druid was closer..... and closer..... and closer. By pure luck, Jon had reached a pair of double doors that led out of the hallway. Unfortunately, as soon as he reached out to the handle, the druid tackled the hell out of him and forced the both of them through the doors. Right before they landed, Jon managed to kick the druid off of him. Both of them slid a few feet before stopping, and Jon could only pray that they were near an exit. Jon slowly stood up and searched the area as quickly as he could while checking for any injuries. His heart began to race as he realized that the druid had vanished. However, he also realized that he had been tackled into the visitation area. Coughing, Jon slowly walked over to the door that led out of the compound, but out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the glass panel of the visitation table had been broken. Out of curiosity, he walked over to it. He noticed all of the bodies of inmates and guards scattered about in a bloody fashion.

“Jon?” he heard someone call his name.

Jon’s eyes darted around the room until he noticed Kunzler sitting against a wall on the floor.

After a chuckle of relief, Jon asked, “What the hell are you doing down there?”

Kunzler stood from the ground, holding his head, clearly in pain. “Hell if I know. Last thing I remember is bein' attacked.”

“Tell me about it.” Jon said. “Look, we need to go ahead and get out of here before it's too late.”

Gulping and suddenly wide eyed, Kunzler said, “I reckon it already istoo late.”

Jon realized that the former sheriff was looking beyond him, at the exit door behind him. He turned around to follow he man's gaze and realized immediately what the problem was. The entire cult was standing in front of the door, side by side, all of their eerie red eyes glowing in the darkness. Strangely enough, but greatly expected, the hermit was among them.

“You..... you son of a bitch.” Jon said to the hermit. Smiling, the hermit responded with, “You were gonna leave me here anyways.” “No,” Jon lied. “why else would we let you leave the cell with us?”

“Him!” the hermit now pointed a bony, shaking finger at Kunzler. “He told me that I was just being used as bait! To hell with that! To hell with you!”

Jon looked back at Kunzler, then returned his attention to the hermit. “The reason he told you that was because we needed to ensure that the guards weren't going to suspect anything. We knew that you would be best at disabling them since you have a past with moving throughout the dark.... with them.” Jon mentioned the rest of the cult with utter disgust. “Think about it. They dismissed you when you didn’t agree with them and their ways. We actually brought you along to help us.”

The entire cult turned their heads and looked at the hermit.

“What do you think they're gonna do to you if they kill us? If they had no use for you before, they sure as hell don’t need you now. They are the ones that have been using you, not us.”

The hermit was now lost for words. What Jon spoke was the truth as far as he knew, but what was he to do now. He'd pretty much put himself between a rock and a hard place. He was either going to die, or die. After looking into the eyes of both Kunzler and Jon, the hermit made his move. He struck one of the cult members in the face, and jumped onto another. In retaliation, the rest of the druids viciously attacked him at once like some savage mob. This gave Jon and Kunzler the opportunity to sneak past the horrid act and slip out of the exit door. After shutting the door behind them on their way out into the stormy night, Kunzler reluctantly looked into the glass to see if perhaps the hermit had managed to scramble away. Instead, he watched in

horror as the hermit was held down as one of the druids shoved a sharp, metal object into the hermit's neck with it's right hand, loosen his cranium, and rip his head clean off of his body with his left. Kunzler shook his head in despair while he turned and walked away with Jon just as the rest of the hermit was literally ripped to pieces by the cult.

VIII.

The Grovesford Lynching Owen Levi, head detective of an independent unit, and his team of three took it upon themselves to investigate the massacrings that took place at the Wilson Corrections Compound. Even with the superior intelligence in their arsenal, they came up with no leads and too many dead bodies. That, however, didn't mean they were going to give up on the case. Owen still had his suspicions. He was well trained to know when something was mild, bad, or even terribly, and he knew well enough that whatever was going on here in Grovesford was indescribably dangerous.

Owen had gotten his roots as a detective back when he witnessed his father, Noah, become one of his hometown's greatest policemen. He admired everything that his dad did for him and his mother and had always hoped to grow into something similar.

All of that happiness, however, would soon fade into nothing but a distant memory. When Owen was merely fourteen years old, his father was inexplicably shot and killed during a heated firefight between a brigade of cops and various allied gangs. It wasn't the end for Owen nonetheless. He decided to somewhat follow in his dad's footsteps and enter the line of law enforcement. Withal, instead of just becoming a cop, he'd decided to do detective work. After being turned down by multiple big time systems, Owen went on to form a small, yet formidable unit of his own that later proved to be the best decision he'd ever made. Ever since the unit formed years ago, Owen has been as well-off as they come, and with twice the common sense. His slim physique, buzzed black hair and rough guy look was a hit with the women, but he voluntarily chose to stay away from relationships. He was a man of law, and nothing but.

From pillar to post, Jon Williams and Matthew Kunzler have been bent to their very limits, and one could only wonder how much more force it would take to finally break these two brave, and unfortunately dammed men. Just a night ago, both of them were trapped inside an asylum with a demoniacal cult of druid monsters as they were chased around and assaulted like helpless ground creatures.

They were just about killed, but due to a blatant falsity, they ended up getting someone else unintentionally ripped apart. Shadowing that, they were forced to travel in horrific weather for miles in the dark until they managed to locate Jon's home and find shelter in his basement just in case there were any authorities about searching for them. To make matters worse, Carolyn was nowhere to be found, and they were going to have

to remain there, in the basement, until their names are cleared by some miracle. When, or even if that would happen was beyond their combined knowledge, but they certainly hoped that in looking for them, the cops found the cult instead and realized the truth. Otherwise, they were pretty much on the most wanted dead list of both the 'good' guys and the 'bad' guys.

(Two Weeks In The Basement)

No one, whether it be cops or neighbors, had come knocking at the Williams home's front door yet, so that was a plus to the two fugitives drinking out of lukewarm water bottles and contemplating their next moves. They both shared the same notion that sooner or later, their names would somehow vanish from radars, and they would be able to go back into the world safely. Unfortunately, not all of that notion was true. Evil was definitely aloof in Grovesford these days, and both Jon Williams and Matthew Kunzler knew better than to underestimate its capabilities. After all, the evil was free to move about unknown, while Jon and Kunzler were both forced to hide from the rest of mankind.

At around noon on a calm Sunday, the paperboy came around the neighborhood on a red bike to do his usual rounds. This was very important news for Jon and Kunzler because now, they could finally see what the verdict was on their future. Jon had bravely chose leave the basement in order to retrieve the newspaper. He now stood cautiously near the front door of his home as he watched through a small opening in the blinds for the paperboy's arrival. Without warning the paperboy suddenly zoomed by his house while tossing a newspaper on his front lawn. Jon gulped hard knowing that now, he would have to go out side and be back in as quickly as he possibly could. Finally, palms sweaty and heart racing, Jon unlocked the front door and swing it open. Just as he prepared himself to launch out onto the lawn, a cop car turned a corner in the near distance and began creeping towards the Williams home. Jon immediately shut and locked the front door and closed the semi open blinds.

The cop car slowed down slightly as it passed by the Williams home, as if the vehicle itself suspecting something peculiar about the house's presence. Jon made a great effort to stay low and out of sight. He didn't move, and he now held his breath as he prayed that the car would just be on its way and not release curious officers. After a concise examination of the premises, the cop car finally traveled off into the distance down a moderately brumous road. Jon took a deep breath before gathering himself. He knew that that could have been it for him and the man in his basement, but would that have been so awful? It definitely couldn't have been worse than whatever the druids wanted to do to him. Jon stood from his frightened crouching position and proceeded to fetch the newspaper.

Moments later, Jon was back into the house and headed down the stairs to the smelly, dull basement. Once there, he slammed the newspaper down on a table near where Kunzler had comfortably taken a seat. Due to the sharp noise of the paper landing on the table, Kunzler was abruptly forced from his train of thought and had to tear his gaze away from the dull image of the outside world through a dirty, foggy window. He now looked at Jon with the least of expression as he waited for the younger man to explain himself.

“Look at the paper.” was all Jon said.

Kunzler then sighed and glanced down at the newspaper. It took him a while to even care what it said since he longed so much for his beloved family, but eventually his spirits were brightened when he finally read the large, black letters that headlined the front page. The read: “Former sheriff Matthew Kunzler and local resident Jon Williams killed in asylum massacring.”

A sudden smile broke across Kunzler's face as he not only found himself glad for the news, but also the sheer inability of officials and their “thorough investigations” were quite the laugh riot.

“Seems like this may be our only chance to move around unnoticed. It’s better than nothing right?” Jon asked.

“Damn straight. Speakin' of which,” Kunzler said as he picked up the newspaper and aimlessly flipped through it's pages and articles, “we'd better go ahead and get a move on now. I need to see my wife and kids, and...” he was abruptly stopped mid sentence by a more than intriguing article that was, indeed, the bearer of bad news and an unfortunate omen for sure.

“And what?” Jon asked as he stared at Kunzler.

The former sheriff cleared his throat and slowly folded the newspaper so that the article was easier to access. He then handed to Jon. “I think you ought to have a look at this.”

Jon cautiously took the paper expecting the worse, and boy did he get just that. The headline read: “MISSING – Carolyn Williams. Presumed dead.” Jon didn’t even have to read the rest of the article. He already knew what happened to his wife while he was away at the Wilson Corrections Compound. They had gotten to her. And now she was gone. Period. Broken, Jon wished that the last moment they'd spent together wasn't as violent as he'd made it, but was too late for wishes and hopes. Jon half expected this to happen eventually, abjectly. He knew that sooner or later, they would either get Carolyn or Rebecca, but luckily enough for him, they didn't get both.

Suddenly, the house phone upstairs began to shrilly ring, causing Jon to deter away from his deluded thoughts. Jon jerked his head toward the stairs that led out of the basement. He tossed the newspaper to the ground and headed for the phone with Kunzler trailing him. The two men followed the phone's ringing into the kitchen. Jon immediately answered and gave the all to standard greeting. However, he was answered with a dial tone. After looking at the receiver as if it was playing a joke on him, Jon slammed it down.

“Must have been a joke.” he told Kunzler, scratching his head.

The phone then began ringing again. Jon stared at it for a while and listened just in case whoever it was decided to hang up. After a few rings, he answered it and listened for some sort of human reply. Instead, he again was answered with a dial tone. Sighing with frustration, Jon slammed the phone back down and

buried his face in his hands. The phone then began to ring once again. As a multitude of swear words began to escape from Jon's mouth, Kunzler suggested that he answer it instead, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Help..... me." It was his wife. Her voice sounded as if she had just got done screaming for her very life.

"Ellen!?" Kunzler yelled.

"Please..... NO!!"

Kunzler's eyes widened in unmitigated fear. His began t break out in a cold sweat as if it was him that needed help instead of his wife.

"Ellen, what the hell is goin' on?!"

Screaming. Then nothing.

Kunzler hung up the receiver and rushed for the front door. Jon, whom had no clue as to what was going on chased after him and attempted to get some answers of some sort. Both men jogged outside to Jon's van as Kunzler attempted to explain to Jon between breaths that his family may be in danger as they spoke. As they both entered the van, Jon hesitated starting the ignition, as he contemplated going back into the house and contacting Rebecca just to make sure that she and Stan were alright.

"Start the damn van Jon!" Kunzler exploded as he watched Jon's hand linger over the keys.

"Alright." Jon put the keys in the ignition and started up the van. After one brief look back at the house, he backed out of the driveway and headed away to the Kunzler home.

Owen and his unit had been vigorously searching every inch of every neighborhood in Grovesford, hoping to find answers to the strange massacring that took place at the Wilson Corrections Compound. That was their occupation, after all, and a case as strange as this one fascinated them far beyond anything that they've dealt with in the past. Owen himself had a taste for danger, and danger was the very thing that lurked about the shadows of these neighborhoods all the time.

After nearly two hours of obsessive searching, the independent unit came to an abrupt halt in front of the Williams home.

Normally, Owen wouldn't just have his team stop by some random home, but the fact that the front door was wide open forced his curiosity and interest to run wild.

“I’m gonna go do a quick scout of the place. You guys just stay in the car.”

Owen then exited the small black vehicle and strode causally up to the home, armed. He stepped onto the front porch and peered through the blackness of the open front door. It was late at night, but that couldn't have been the reason that this seemingly normal abode felt so..... creepy. Regardless, Owen stepped inside the home and prayed that nothing would suddenly jump out at him. No, nothing would jump out at him tonight. Nonetheless, Owen had the itching feeling that he was being watched.

As Owen cautiously crept into the assumed deserted home, the first thing that he immediately noticed was that the air became bitterly frigid. It was as if the home's air conditioning was implausibly damaged. Nevertheless, Owen wasn't going to pass up this chance due to some ill atmospheric implications. He just knew that the Wilson Corrections Compound massacring had some direct or indirect link to this home and its residents, wherever they may be.

After deciding that the thick darkness would be too much to search in, Owen pulled a tiny flashlight out of his coat pocket and turned it on. Surprisingly, the little bulb pierced through the darkness with ease as Owen shown it all around the area he now stood. From what he could tell, nothing about the home, besides the fact that the door was left wide open, was out of the ordinary. All of the furniture seemed to be in place and there weren't any signs of domestic unrest anywhere. Owen made his way to what he figured was a living room on the downstairs floor. He noted the normal setup, including a two seat and three seat sofa along with a matching recliner, and an oak wood table. Ordinary. All if it. Regardless of all of these seemingly normal things, something still felt terribly wrong to Owen. Perhaps it was the fact that, just behind him, four small pair of radiant red eyes emerged from the everlasting dark corners of the house's interior and watched Owen with unknown intent.

Owen knew he was being observed, he just didn't know where to begin to look for the intruders. With a slight sigh of disappointment, Owen flicked the small flashlight's switch to off and causally placed it back into a pocket on his black detective's coat. He then adjusted his hat ever so slightly and headed out of the front door. He wasn't done investigating yet, though. Instead of getting back into the little black car that idled in front of the Williams home, he went around to the side of the house, unlatched the fence door and walked into the backyard.

As Owen casually walked around the backyard examining the back of the house, a smiling, demonic looking face illuminated by the glow of the moonlight eerily pressed itself against one of the upstairs windows as it wickedly gleamed down at an unknowing Owen, as if this whole ordeal was some twisted joke. Owen soon caught wind of the hard eyes watching him, and jerked his head upward to the window to see who might have possibly been looking down at him, but he saw nothing.

Owen then smiled to himself. This was a game, and he was nothing more than an unknowing player. However, he'd been in this type of situation many times before. So had his father. The enemy apparently believed that it was smarter than him. Owen believed that whomever they may be, they were foolish. He wasn't done with this case by a long shot, and neither was his faithful team.

Speaking of his team, Owen cursed under his breath as he'd forgotten that they'd even been waiting for him to return to the car. Placing his hands in the pockets of his coat, Owen then walked out from the backyard and headed over to the car full of restless men. That's when Owen unfortunately was exposed to the deathly truth. The enemy had gotten to him before he could get to them.

The car, instead of being normal looking, had heavy amounts of smoke coming from it's interior, so much so that he couldn't see anything inside. Everything from the steering wheel and the seats were greatly blanketed in smoke. He couldn't see his unit or anything else for that matter.

"... Christ.." was all Owen could mumber.

The detective had no idea what had happened from the time he left he car to now, but obviously there were manyof whoever was watching him. Many indeed. Owen slowly stepped up to the side of the car touched the driver's side window.

"Cold." he said.

He slowly retrieved his flashlight from his coat pocket and shone it through the glass, but again could see nothing but gray smoke. Suddenly, however, the head of one of his comrades loudly thumped against the window, causing spiderweb-like cracks to wildly spread through the glass in all directions. With utter fear flowing throughout his body, Owen then realized that his entire team had been murdered. The "head" he observed was nothing more than charred looking gray "flesh" slowly falling in small chunks off of a black, smoking skull that still possessed eyeballs somehow. Reddened, bloodshot eyeballs that stared back at him with the wildest of fright.

"No..." Owen said as he placed a quivering hand over his mouth. "No....."

Jon didn't know why in the hell Kunzler chose to have his whole family live so far away from the residential Grovesford area, but now was not the time for those types of inquiries.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do." Kunzler muttered as the van continued to speed toward his home.

Jon briefly looked over at the old man, then returned his eyes back to the barely visible road. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," Kunzler began, "if I come home and find that those sons of bitches hurt anyone from my family, I don't know what I'm gonna do."

“You can do what I’m doing.” Jon said. “You can accept the fact that people are gonna die. Because I know better than anyone in this town what it feels like to have a loved one's blood spilled over senseless mayhem.”

Kunzler didn’t take notice to what Jon said. “Big, bad ol' killers is what they claim to be.” the old man chuckled. “If you're bad enough to kill, you're good enough to get killed.”

The two men traveled the rest of the way in silence. Jon tried to keep his mind on the dangerously lessening road. It seed to him that the more they drove into the “country” part of Grovesford, the more the standard cement road turned into nothing more than dirt. Was it safe for Kunzler's family to be so far out into the country? Perhaps not, but where in Grovesford was it safe to be? Nowhere, Jon thought. Unless you're six feet under Grovesford's soil, you're never safe.

Kunzler tried keeping his mind wrapped around what he'd tell his wife once he returned home. Thus far since meeting Jon, he's killed nuns, been locked up, and has been assaulted on numerous occasions. Now, after so much time dealing with something that shouldn’t even be his concern anymore since he's no longer the sheriff, he gets to see his wife, three sons, daughter, and brother.

“It's right up here... around the corner.” Kunzler pointed out.

Jon made the slight turn and headed forth into what looked like a neighborhood, even though the houses were incredibly spread out over the dirt landscape. Dirt and trees, Jon thought.

“Alright, slow it down now. Turn into this here driveway. It's on the right side.”

Kunzler's “directions” were quite unnecessary since the home was the only one for the next twenty or so yards, but nonetheless, Jon acted as if he didn’t already know that as he pulled the heavy van into the driveway. However, instead of turning off the ignition and headlights, Jon sat there in shock as he stared at the grisly sight before them. Too, did Matthew Kunzler.

Instead of a warm, happy welcoming, Kunzler was exposed to six dead bodies of his family. Without word, Kunzler forced the passenger's side door open and collapsed out onto the driveway. There was nothing happy, healthy, or heart-warming about what had happened to Kunzler's folks.

Jon slowly got out of the van as he heard Kunzler begin to sob at what they witnessed. He then walked slowly to the front of the van, but found that he was too petrified to walk any further. He felt sick. He felt as if he was going to either throw up or pass out. Hell, he wouldn’t be surprised if both of those things happened.

Every member of the Kunzler family had been violently hung from a large wicked looking tree that stood out of place in an otherwise open yard. Kunzler's wife was fifty- five years old. But she was incredibly

unrecognizable now. Her hair was torn off from her scalp, and her face was beaten and disfigured atrociously.

Then, there were the three eighteen year old sons, all of which were, too, disfigured. Except that with them, they were also missing all of their limbs. Lord know what the cult may have done to them, but it didn't matter. They were dead now.

Next was Kunzler's brother, whom was forty five years old. the man's head was contorted and twisted around (presumably his broken neck was the cause of his death, among a slew of other atrocities). His body was facing the wrong way, but that was just to ensure that whomever may have the displeasure of passing by could see his face.

Lastly, there was the worst display of them all, Kunzler's sixteen year old daughter. One could scarcely tell what she was now, because it looked as if she had been unmercifully torched in flames while screaming in fear, as her jaw hung open.

Hung. All of them. Pitilessly slain. All of these horrific sights were bad enough, but the cult had made sure to have as much twisted amusement with this as they potentially could. They placed lit Christmas lights, wires, and barbed wire from a fence around the necks and such of the bodies in ways that would have killed them again had they had the ability to come back to life.

Moreover, instead of eyeballs, there were lit light bulbs shoved into the sockets which created a supernaturally eerie glow of yellow light through the darkness of the night. To top all of it off, the clothes for their respective genders had all been disgustingly mismatched purposefully. The cult had placed the women's clothing on the men's bodies and vice versa.

Kunzler was devastated. He was enraged. He was a broken man, as was Jon. The two men stood there in the bright glow of the van's headlights as they stared in shock at the mutilated bodies of Matthew Kunzler's family. Nothing could have been worse, but Jon and Kunzler both felt that after all of this, the cult still had some sinister activity up their sleeves. Regardless, Kunzler knew that he would have to avenge the deaths of his family. He and Jon both had now virtually lost everything that meant something to them and they would never get them back.

Jon slowly walked over to Kunzler to console the emotionally damaged man. As he did so, he knew deep down that the cult could have left the Kunzler family alone. He knew they could have, but he also knew that they wouldn't do that. It was hopeless trying to convince any form of "good" from them. Which is why something began to replay in Jon's head. Something that Kunzler said earlier. Something that would stick with Jon until this entire ordeal was done with. If you're bad enough to kill, then you're good enough to get killed, Jon thought as sirens could be heard in the distance. Both men now shared similar feelings; sorrow, anger,..... and revenge.

Note: This is a free digital edition from www.ooboko.com. If you paid for this e-book it will be an illegal, pirated copy so please advise the author and ooboko. We also recommend you return to the retailer to demand an immediate refund.

IX.

The Crucifixion In the days following what many are calling the Grovesford Lynching, Jon and Matthew Kunzler's names were cleared of any accusations filed against them before. No longer did anyone believe that they were murderers of any sort, but many did believe they were troubled and perhaps insane. That didn't matter so much now, because neither of them gave a damn what Grovesford thought of them. Neither of them needed anyone's sympathy nor did they want it.

“What did you say your name was again?” Jon asked the man wearing the black detectives coat and hat.

“Owen.” the man responded. “Owen Levi.”

Owen had come back to the William's home a few days after his last unfortunate visit, and he'd been hoping that someone would be there this time. Luckily for him, Jon was home, and Owen's case could go on with or without his team. Owen had been having a slightly awkward conversation with Jon about the strange happenings that took place when he'd last trespassed. They were now in the backyard as Owen explained things to Jon that, quite frankly, he already knew.

“Now,” Owen was saying, “if you don't believe what I'm telling you, I understand completely-”

“Oh, I believe you. More than you know.” Jon cut the man off with valid reassurance.

“So, this paranormal stuff is commonplace to you?” Owen asked, not quite understanding what Jon meant.

With a half-hearted chuckle, Jon responded with, “No. Well, sort of.” Jon was finding it hard to figure out a way to explain the cult to Owen. “There's some things that have been happening to my family. Unholy things. I don't know why they've been happening. I don't know when it'll stop.”

Owen tried to understand this as best he could. “Things like what? Ghosts?”

“I wish it was that simple.” Jon said. “I wish it was just ghosts.”

Owen shook his head in confusion. “So, what are we talking about here? You said your family-”

“Dead.” Jon said abruptly. “Most of them are dead. Me and my son are the only ones left. Everyone else..... dead.”

Owen avoided looking into Jon’s eyes. He didn’t want to even ideate the type of expression that this man could have withheld. Instead, he simply asked, “How? How did they all die?”

Jon clenched his fists tightly, his knuckles turning a ghastly white. “For some reason, we've been the victims of an unholy rebellion since we moved here to Grovesford. At first, they broke into our home and murdered a babysitter. They killed our dog. They took my son. Ever since then, they've come back to pick my family apart until there's nothing left but blood and anger.” Jon looked down at his trembling hands.

“They?” Owen asked.

“I'm guessing that they're some kind of cult. They're druids. Not like the standard lords of the earth type of thing, but druids with a bloodthirsty rage. Instead of helping people, they destroy them. Instead of having faith in some god, they damn well may be satanists.”

This matter was quite the shocker to Owen. He didn’t anticipate learning of any of what he'd just heard. Even with all of his years of investigator work he'd never heard of anything like this in the past. It was unusual yet somehow very engrossing.

As of late, the Grovesford cemetery, along with it's unfortunately troubled township, has been a dismally unsettling and depressing place to be at anytime of the night or day. The majority of it's tombstones had only the names of those murdered scrawled within the cement, and the once pretty flowers that once made the place seem “lively” had died off and withered away into nothing but old stems that would forever be forgotten. Even the ground was nothing but brown grass and dirt patches scattered about to and fro due to the excessive act of shoving metal shovel tips into the earth and bringing up heaps of soil. There was a ghostly grey mist that lingered about the atmosphere just above the ground. It gave off the impression that dead spirits whom refused to rest in peace six feet below were moving about and watching those who dare chose to visit the Gothic premises. Finally, the trees were no happy matter either, as they very eerily resembled large, skinny, bony hands that protruded from the earth and began clawing madly at the grey skies as if some creatures from below had a vendetta against God.

On a bleak, quiet evening, Matthew Kunzler and Jon Williams had pushed away any doubts or fears that either of them might have had for the cemetery, or Grovesford itself, and decided to go and visit the grave site of the former sheriff's late family. They had arrived at the cemetery with the largest of headaches and the oddest feelings of crude sickness in their stomachs. For every moment that passed, and for every breath that they took, they could only wonder if all of it was limited. It was as if there were really some

hourglasses somewhere that contained the sands of their precious life fabric, and the druid cult had evilly turned them or, even worse, smashed them, and were laughing maniacally to themselves about their triumphs. Jon and Kunzler both felt that they would be in line for what the people buried under the dirt had to endure, but they felt that if and when it happened to them, it would be a whole hell of a lot worse.

The winds of Grovesford were blowing strongly across the dull grave site and howled faintly as Matthew Kunzler glanced down at the aligned graves of his late beloved family. There were many thoughts running through Kunzler's old mind, but amongst all of them, he knew that this would have happened sooner or later. In fact, he had expected it to happen all along. He just didn't know when to expect it, and he wished that he could have been there to die alongside all of them.

"I'm sorry." Jon suddenly broke the silence that sheathed the sullen environment. It caught Kunzler by surprise.

"Come again?" he asked, blinking frequently.

Jon took a short breath, shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and said, "You and I both know that this is my fault. All of it."

Kunzler continued to stare down at the gray headstones as he attempted to take in what Jon had just told him. Was it truly all Jon's fault? Kunzler didn't seem to think so.

"Look," Kunzler told him. "This stuff... the killings, and murders..... they've been happening all over Grovesford way before you and your family showed up. Now, I understand why you think it's your fault. But if any one of us was to be blamed and faulted for what's happened over the course of the time you've been livin' here, it's me."

"How so?" Jon asked.

After a deep sigh and a slight scratch of his chin, Kunzler told him, "I'd known what was gonna happen ever since I got word that you'd moved into that house."

Jon didn't quite understand. "So, does me living in that house have something to do with this?"

"It's not the house, Jon. It's the situation. You're a standard family man. Your stay at home wife, your lovely children... you were the perfect target for them, and deep down, I knew that they'd come for you. And, as predicted, they did."

"What do you mean you knew they'd come for us?" Jon cracked his knuckles and placed his hands on his hips in frustration. "What don't I understand here?"

“Jon, there's not much that I know that you don't know. I mean, after all, what is confusin' about a group of insane madmen with a fancy for killin' folks? The fact is this: for the past sixtyplus years, they've been doin' just that. Killin' the innocent and torturing this town. That is the fact..... andthe mystery.”

For the next few days, an eerily deafening silence encased every single component of Grovesford, Alabama. Every crack in the road, every locked front door, every dog in the backyard, and every child sleeping soundly was entranced with an aftershock of fear and silence. Death was omnipresent and maliciously sifting through every particle of oxygen in the once civil and peaceful air of the small town. Everything that had a beating heart, animals and human beings alike, was quite alert and aware of a lingering threat. If Grovesford was a living breathing thing, it would currently suffer from paranoia and high blood pressure. It, as it stands, was dearly afraid.

Only days after the visit to the cemetery, while Jon and Owen were both sitting in absolute silence in the William's abode, Owen Levi, the determined lone detective, payed them a somewhat expected visit late in the evening. After Owen stood outside and rang the doorbell five times, Jon decided to go ahead and answer it since it didn't look like Kunzler was doing too much of anything except breathing. And Jon wasn't even sure that Kunzler was doing that.

“Yes?” Jon asked after he opened the front door and looked into the dark shades of Mr. Levi.

After clearing his throat and removing his shades, Owen told Jon, “Look, I know you've been through an ordeal. As have

I. My team..... they were murdered here when I first came to investigate.” Jon could only blink as Owen told him this. “And,” Owen continued, “I'm thinking that it'd be best for me to perhaps stay here with you and the former sheriff for a while. It isn't safe for me to go about investigating this matter alone, and I strongly believe you and him could use a bit of assistance.”

Jon rubbed his chin and sighed. He understood where Owen was coming from, but he was skeptical about all of this because it may or may not cause more issues as far as the cult goes. He didn't want to put Owen in danger, but he did need the help. He needed to know where the cult was and he needed to satisfy his inner demons. Owen, even though he no longer had a team, could very well assist him in uncovering the cult's whereabouts and give them what they have coming.

“Fine.” Jon finally said. “Welcome aboard. As long as you can help me, Kunzler and I will help you.”

The two men shook hands, but as soon as that happened, Jon felt like an enormous fool. He immediately realized that he'd just placed this unknowing man's life in significant danger. Even though it was just speculation, Jon felt deep down inside that a whole new world of danger was on it's way into his life. And he was indeed correct. The ungodly was inevitable.

The seemingly unbreakable silence of a frightened community continued to encase the streets and neighborhoods of Grovesford. It'd been quite some time since the last murdering took place, but few still strongly believed that the "black ghosts" were still out there, just waiting for a lonely soul to wander off from civility and find itself lost within a jungle of death.

Over the course of a few slow days, people seemed to even come back outside and live normal lives again. Children began going to parks and some of the residents even started to mow their lawns as if life had always been a picture from a cheap postcard. Shockingly, Grovesford was slowly reverting back to 'normal'. It was as if everyone had completely forgotten about the murders that once loomed within the many fears of their subconscious.

"No one has gone missing. No murders. No reports of any crimes whatsoever. Just..... sanity." Owen stared out of a living room window as Jon and Kunzler both sat in recliners in the William's home's living room area.

Jon, whom wasn't paying Owen any mind, was eagerly attempting to solve the rubric's cube in record time. He failed. Kunzler was in the process of shining an unloaded handgun. All in all, things had settled down.

"Grovesford seems to be at peace." Owen said, continuing to stare out of the window.

"Ain't a bad thing. Wouldn't you reckon?" asked Kunzler, speaking to no one in particular.

"The only thing I 'reckon' is that they've left Grovesford." Owen said.

Jon slowly placed the unfinished rubric's cube down on the wooden table in front of him. "You think they've left?" he asked

"No, I know they're gone. If they aren't, why haven't any of us been attacked? Why hasn't anyone been murdered?"

"You speak about that like it's a bad thing." Kunzler said. "Frankly, I enjoy a day when nobody has to worry about findin' a knife in their throat."

"Don't we all." Owen said.

"Actually, I'm going to have to agree with Owen on this. I'm thinking that this might be a ploy." Jon said, causing both Kunzler and Owen to simultaneously raise their eyebrows in surprise.

“And how so?” Kunzler asked.

Jon stood up and crossed his arms. “They might have left Grovesford. They might be hiding. Either way, I think this is all to fool everyone.”

“When's the last time you talked with your daughter?” Owen asked Jon.

It was as if time had suddenly stopped. Jon recalled wanting to contact Rebecca before the cult slayed Kunzler's family. He recalled someone calling the William's home and not saying anything. Could that have been Rebecca, or even Stan?

Could they be in danger while he and the rest are oblivious?

“It's been a while.” Jon said, looking down at the floor. He then reached over and picked up one of the home phones. He dialed Stan's number however, after about three seconds, he realized that it was dead. He slowly placed the phone down. A cold sweat began to build in the palms of his hands.

There was a lifeless silence within the dark living room now. No longer did either of them believe that is was “safe”. They knew it would never be safe again until someone stopped the murders from occurring. All three men deeply thought of what could be going on as the phone's “dead” tone hummed away.

Merely three days later did things go wrong in the absolute worst of ways of ways. The seemingly ever-changing weather of Grovesford once again became violent and dark, causing a deathly storm to overtake the sullen landscape of homes and neighborhoods. The streets became barren as residents scurried away into their safe little homes as the storm bellowed fiercely and mercilessly. Dogs of all sorts became restless as their owners left them outside at the mercy of the ill weather. They barked and jumped at the sky only to remember that the people that claimed they loved them had them chained to trees and imprisoned within chain-link fences, powerless to the wrath of nature. It was borderline chaos all over again, however, the worst was indeed yet to come.

Outside of the Williams home, as the storm continued to swear at the world, a single formation of eight figures stood hidden in shadow. They stood, unnoticed and undetected, and watched through the windows of the Williams home as the oblivious trio (Jon, Kunzler, and Owen) maneuvered throughout the dimly lit dwelling.

“Dad...” came a muffled, soft cry from within the circle of druids.

The druid in front tore his murderous gaze away from the home and looked back at the cause of the outcry within the group. He smiled sickeningly. Over the course of the past few days, the druids, as Jon and Owen

expected, had left Grovesford. They'd traveled, unseen, down to Florida. Miami. And now, they had returned with Rebecca Williams at their horrid mercy.

Inside the Williams home, Jon was busying himself in the kitchen while Owen and Kunzler sat in the living room and engrossed themselves in a deeply philosophical conversation. The storm outside continued to emit rage as lightning flashes became increasingly constant. Jon took a cold beer from the fridge, cracked it open, and took a long gulp. Immediately after, a brief movement from outside caught Jon's attention. He slowly walked over to the door that led out into the backyard and peered out at the stormy darkness through the glass. He saw nothing.... but felt something.

Jon took a deep breath and turned away from the back doors. He felt uneasy, as if there was something lurking throughout the atmosphere that wasn't there before. Shaking it off, he slowly walked into the living room to join Kunzler and Owen. Withal, at the exact moment he turned away from the glass doors, a blinding flash of lightning blanketed the darkness for all of two and a half seconds, revealing the struggling, screaming, and terrified form of Rebecca Williams as she was dragged away by two of the ghost-like druids.

Jon walked casually into the dimly lit living room with his half empty beer can and sat down in one of the recliners.

"What's with the weather in this town?" Owen immediately asked as he listened to the increasingly loud storm. "Seems like there's always either good weather, or very bad weather. Nothing in between."

"I look at it like this," Kunzler

responded, "when the weather's good, it's merely a sign of bad weather to come. And when it gets bad like this, it's a sign of bad things to come. So, simply put, it's just nature's way of lettin' us townsfolk know that all hell is 'bout to break loose."

Jon chuckled. "As ridiculous as that sounds, it's hard to argue against it."

Kunzler slowly rubbed his old, bony hands together. "You can claim it to be as ridiculous as you want if we get through the night without having to fend for our lives. Until then, just be cautious, hear?"

After a mere thirty seconds later of sitting in the eerily quiet living room in silence, a loud, crisp glass-shattering noise could be heard from downstairs.... from the basement. It caused everyone but Kunzler to jump in surprise.

"What the hell was that?!" Owen yelled.

Kunzler slowly reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small revolver. "It's exactly what I warned you about thirty seconds ago." he said with a stern face as he slowly stood from the chair in which he was seated.

Jon then followed suit as he stood from his recliner and fetched a handgun from one of the drawers nearby. Owen waited for a moment to gather himself. He hadn't contemplated having to be in a situation such as this, yet here he was. He figured that Jon and Kunzler knew very well what they were doing, so without further delay, he stood from his seat and began to walk over to his suitcase laying over by the front door to the house. He was immediately halted in his tracks, however, as he caught clear sight of the lumbering form of a druid standing on the front porch, glaring insanely at the trio through one of the windows as it's hooded cloak forbiddingly dripped with rain.

Owen stumbled backwards at the sudden presence of the hooded menace, running into Kunzler as he fell onto the carpeted living room floor. Kunzler, whom had not been aware, jumped in surprise and mistakenly fired two bullets wildly into the home, one of them just barely missing Jon.

"What in the hell...!!!" Kunzler spun around and stared down at Owen, who was already scrambling to get back to his feet.

Owen pointed to the window where he'd seen the druid, but nothing was there now. "I swear I saw one of them." he said, eyes wide with fear and excitement. "Standing right there on the porch, watching all of us."

"Can't say I don't believe ya." Kunzler said. "But you sure as hell can't react like that every time you do see one! You'll end up getting somebody killed!"

As Owen and Kunzler regrouped, Jon slowly walked over to the window where Owen claimed to have last seen the druid. There was a significant amount of fog coating the window now, and Jon couldn't really tell what was outside. He began to clear the fog away with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. And there it was. Darkly hooded, red eyes, inhumanly sinister expression and all. Before Jon could react, the druid violently burst through the window and tackled him to the floor. Amongst the struggle, Jon's gun was knocked out of his hand, and he was left defenseless as the morbid beast began to literally choke the life out of him. Luckily enough for him, Kunzler had good aim. The old man immediately emptied the other four bullets into the back of the manic druid, without the slightest bit of regret.

After a brief moment, Jon pushed the druid off of him and stood up. He wasn't sure if it was dead or not since it was still lying on its back, but he wasn't going to wait around for another one to blindside them. He walked over to the spot where his gun was knocked, retrieved it, and made his way to the basement door.

"Wait," Kunzler said, "where are you going?"

"Down there." Jon said, pointing his gun towards the floor. "To the basement. That's where the noise came from."

“Right.” Kunzler replied, staring down at the druid's motionless body. “Owen and I will stay up here in case they come through the front door or somethin'. Holler if ya need us.”

After a nod of agreement, Jon opened the door that led down into the basement. For the most part, the declining staircase was immersed completely in darkness. At the very end, however, there was a slight flickering of an orange light, similar to that of a candle burning in a dark area. Jon took a deep breath and made the descent. He left the door open behind him in case anything went wrong, which he strongly believed was going to be the case inevitably.

Jon finally reached the very bottom of the med-length staircase, but as he did, the flickering orange light strangely vanished, leaving him blinded by the everlasting darkness yet again. A sudden flash of lighting revealed four druids standing at the center of the basement floor like statues, all looking right at Jon as if they were programmed to do so. Jon thought about firing away into the dark, but he was no fool. He knew that even if he actually had seen the druids, they were no longer there now. After making sure that his weapon was cocked and ready to go, he slowly edged forward. He safely assured himself that he'd be able to find the light switch string pull without tripping over anything since he and Carolyn (it pained him to remember his wife) never got around to finishing the basement.

Jon assumed that he was near the string pull... all the same, from out of the vague blackness came a single cry. That cry was then followed by a series of uncontrolled sobs. The sobs, as if they weren't familiar enough, were proceeded by.....

“Dad?” It was, without a doubt, Rebecca.

Perhaps on pure instinct, Jon's hand shot up above him, its fingers wrapped sloppily around the string pull, and pulled the blasted switch, turning the lights on inside the basement.

It was something that he wished he'd never done. In front of him, on a bare wall was a large cross. Tied to that cross was his petrified daughter.

“Oh..... my God....” Jon said as he dropped his gun.

Rebecca's hair was a mess, some of it was ripped out of her scalp, and her face was bruised in certain areas. Her clothes were torn and her face was sweaty. There were thick pieces of white rope wrapped around her wrists, bonding her ankles together, and tied tightly around her neck.

“Dad...” Rebecca said, her voice raspy as she struggled with every letter. “They... they took...” She was suddenly wide eyed.

From behind, the remaining seven members of the cult emerged from the dark corners of the glowering basement area. Jon had only a split second to react, but it was all he needed.

“Kunzler, Owen! Get your asses down here!!!”

From upstairs, Kunzler believed heard Jon’s desperate outcry and rushed over to the open basement door. He was followed by Owen, whom now had a handgun of his own.

“Jon!” he yelled down. “Jon, was that you!?”

After standing there for about twenty seconds, Kunzler suggested that one of them go down to see if Jon needed help. It should have been obvious since there was all kinds of rough noises coming from the basement.

“I’ll do it.” Owen said. Without hesitation, he made good on his word and began skipping down the steps to assist Jon.

Kunzler watched intently as Owen made his way down into the basement. However, he and Owen had completely ignored the fact that there was still a “dead” druid laying on the floor in the living room.

The druid, whom had merely been playing possum, snuck up behind Kunzler in an extremely silent fashion, and violently shoved him down the steps. Kunzler eventually bombarded into an unknowing Owen, who was just reaching the bottom. The wild impact sent both of them careening into the basement, where another “battle” was currently underway.

“Help!” Jon yelled as he eventually fell victim to merciless double-team attack. One of the druids sent a lamp into the back of Jon’s head. The blow nearly knocked him out cold, yet it still sent him falling forward. He landed on his hands and knees, but the assault was far from over as he soon saw the lamp from out of the corner of his eye coming at him yet again. This time, it landed flush on his jaw, sending him into a brief state of unconsciousness. He awoke a few seconds later to the sound of rapid gunfire as Owen and Kunzler attempted to send the satanic madmen to hell with a flurry of bullets. To his dismay, they were missing most of their attempted shots due to the fact that they weren’t really aiming the guns. They were simply pointing and firing in what proved to be complete chaos. The chaotic mannerisms only caused matters to worsen as one of them mistakenly shot the two bulbs that lit the basement. Once again, all of them, including the druids, were within the eye of complete darkness blinded by the unknown. Then, there was only silence.

“Jon!” came Kunzler’s desperate cry. “Jon, are you alright?”

“Rebecca...” Jon said. “Rebecca?!”

He was answered by an ear splitting shriek of pain and terror, followed shortly by a blinding orange light.

“Oh my.... No.... NOOO!!!!” Jon yelled.

In front of him, Kunzler, and Owen, the druid cult lit Rebecca Williams on fire as she helplessly screamed and attempted to break loose, but was ultimately destined to remain tied to the cross, burning to death.

The cult stood near Rebecca's burning body and stared at the three men as the wicked flames lit the basement. One of the members decided to add insult to injury. He grabbed a nearby case of gasoline and repeatedly dumped on Rebecca's already engulfed body. The excess gasoline caused a massive amount of smoke and flames to surge upward and nearly cast a blinding orange and white glow inside the small area.

Jon pitifully attempted to launch himself at the druids, but the one holding the gasoline can threw it in Jon's direction. It landed just in front of Jon and exploded on impact, sending him, Owen, and Kunzler flying into the wall behind him. The explosion, while dangerous, wasn't nearly fatal, and the men managed to recover shortly. They stood and observed the madness that was strewn in front of them, searching for the druids. However, once the smoke cleared, the druids were nowhere to be found. In anger, and anguish, Jon slowly moved closer to the charred body of his daughter as the final licks of flame continued to burn away. He dropped to his knees just in front of her, a broken man. Here he was, the prime of his life, destroyed within. Here he was, on his knees in front of the burning body of his beloved daughter. Here he was, Jon Williams, fighting the urge to set himself on fire and put an easy end to all of the hell that was his life. It was as if he'd been tied to this fate all along. No matter what he did, this was the outcome of his life. This is how it would end. The cult had once again, without purpose, assaulted him and his family, and succeeded.

“Why?” Jon mumbled as he stared up at the molten face of his daughter. “Why?”

In a world virtually overrun by hate and evil, was a reason to the madness of these “men” necessary? As Kunzler had stated before, the group of eight had been haunting Grovesford for over sixty horrifying years. That was the fact, and the mystery. It was fate, a sinister curse in disguise.

X.

Grave Danger “We've gotta get out of the house.” Owen kneeled beside Jon and urged him to collect himself en route to survival. “They might try that on us next,” he said, referencing the slaying that had just occurred before their helpless eyes.

Jon reluctantly stood to his feet. His eyes were rimmed with red and the result of watching his daughter be burned moments ago had seemingly caused him to age about seven good years. There were lines and wrinkles forming patterns all over his face now, and his once cheerful aura had been substantially diminished. He wasn't the same person. He never would be the same man again. He thought that perhaps he was on the brink of certain insanity.

“Jon, come on now,” came Owen's voice.

To Jon, Owen's sudden outcry sounded as if it was coming from miles away and getting gradually closer as more words escaped his lips. For a moment, Owen's words sounded alien. Jon's mind was in such a haze that he couldn't readily interpret too much of anything occurring around him yet. Eventually, though, he was snapped from his stage of initial shock and terror. For the moment, anyway.

“Did you hear me? I said we've gotta get outta this house!”

After taking a long, shaky breath, Jon responded. “Ok. I... just..... alright, let's go.”

The trio ascended up the basement stairs and onto the first floor. Even though they each had lived there for a long enough period, they felt as if they were maneuvering through a haunted dwelling.

“Sons of bitches... go ahead n' pop outta the dark so we can kick your asses,” Kunzler mumbled angrily.

Almost miraculously, they managed to make it to the front door without that happening.

“Alright. Let's just assume the worst.” Owen said as he slowly reached for the doorknob. He slowly turned the knob halfway. It clicked. With a worried expression, he looked back at Jon and Kunzler.

“Open it,” Jon said.

Owen turned the knob the rest of the way and swung the door wide open.

As expected, there was someone standing on the porch. However, it wasn't anyone from the cult.

Jon recognized him. “Stan”?

It was Stan all right. He may have been sweaty, exhausted, and beaten up, but it was him nonetheless.

“Stan.... what the hell happened to you?” Jon asked.

Stan was bent over with his hands on his knees, wheezing uncontrollably. By the looks of him, Jon figured that he'd had an unfortunate run in with the cult.

After catching his breath, Stan managed to raspily whisper, “Don't know.... exactly. Rebecca... gone....”

A sudden crashing sound, like that of glass breaking, emerged from the “empty” house.... from the gloom. After turning back to make sure the cult hadn't re-entered the home, Jon ushered Kunzler and Owen from the doorway and shut the door.

“She just disappeared..... don't know what happened. Was..... attacked...” Stan attempted to continue, but his words eventually turned into coughs of blood. The cult must have done a number on him.

“Stan, listen to me,” Jon said. “We-...”

There was another sudden noise that emanated from the house, but this time, it was right at the closed front door. It was a loud thud followed by what sounded like extremely high pitched shrieking. All four men looked up at the door, and through one of the small glass windows, they spotted the charred skull of Rebecca Williams being forced against it. This was immediately followed by loud banging on the door.

“What in the hell...” said Kunzler.

It was soon clear what was going on. From one of the porch windows, the rest of Rebecca's alienated body crashed through. A cultist then climbed out through the shattered glass and onto the porch.

“Get in the van.” Jon said to everyone.

Owen, not wanting to run anymore, said, “What about-”

“Get in the van, NOW!!”

The three men scrambled to the idle van sitting in the driveway as the rest of the cult emerged from the abandoned home like a black sickness oozing from a vast, massively empty void.

Jon, who jumped into the driver's seat, immediately started the ignition once everyone was inside, and pulled off down the lone road, leaving his home, and the deathly infestation that had repeatedly invaded its serenity behind in the dark.

The sizable van slowly crept along the dark, rain-wet slick streets of Grovesford. There was an incredible amount of caution in every ounce of gas that the van used to edge forward along the roads, and the man behind the wheel hardly blinked in anticipation for an expected attack out of nowhere. All four men in the van sat in silence as they aimlessly drove around the murky, dark atmospheric environment. The moon's eerie purple-white glow lit a bright enough path that allowed them to see what, if anything at all, was in front of the van up ahead. There was a heavy dose of paranoia shared between them as the night dragged on.

Stan, whom was sitting in the passengers seat, broke the silence with a single question. “What's going on?” he asked.

Jon gripped the steering wheel very tightly as he struggled to formulate an answer that wouldn't hint at him being the least bit insane. "When we moved here," he began, "we figured that this town would be the new beginning that we'd been hoping for. It was a new beginning all right. Just not the one we'd hoped for."

"Mr. Williams here met me when I was still the sheriff of Grovesford." Kunzler said. "I'd been the sheriff here for so many long years. There's been things that I dun seen that will stay burned into my memory."

"What sort of things?" Stan asked.

"So," Kunzler continued, ignoring Stan's question. "I was the witness and the victim of a horrid crime that was to forever be repeated here in Grovesford. When I was a young boy, a strange cult assaulted my family and killed my mother. They took everythin' from me. They took my innocence. They took my childhood. They took everythin'."

Stan said nothing. He just waited for Kunzler to continue as the van softly hummed along.

"After that, I was a changed person. I became aware of all the hate and negligence and all that. I felt that I needed to fill a new void in my life and chose to become many things that involved helpin' folks. A sheriff was one of em. Unfortunately for me and this here town, the nightmares weren't over. The cult repeatedly returned to this town and committed similar crimes. They've even gone to such lows as stealin' infant children."

Stan opened his mouth to say something, but was once again interrupted by Kunzler.

"Time and time again I hear about a family torn apart by them. I hear about a broken mother committing suicide cause her baby was kidnapped. It's some of the sickest.... shit that happens in this town. It's been that way for over sixty years. Sixty long, unforgivable years. And to top it all off, nobody knows why they do it."

"That's why we're all here now." Jon said as he eyes squinted at the seemingly endless road sprawled out before the van. "They took Jacob. They killed Carolyn. Rebecca. Benjamin. We're their targets now."

Stan couldn't immediately think of anything to say in response. Eventually, he said, "Is this a joke?"

No one responded.

Stan looked at the faces of the other three men in the van. None of them were smiling.

After nearly thirty minutes of cruising around, Jon's attention was caught when they slowly rolled by the Grovesford cemetery. He abruptly brought the van too a halt as he noticed something entirely peculiar.

Pastor Morgan, the man whom Jon had consulted to for advice was standing in the center of the mass of graves, holding up what looked like a large crucifix. He seemed to be saying something, but Jon couldn't tell. Soon, Owen, Kunzler, and Stan all noticed what Jon saw, and each man shared the same inquiry about what they were seeing.

“What in God's name is he doin' out there?” Kunzler asked, speaking to no one in particular.

“Who is that?” Stan asked.

Jon continued to stare out at the old man. What was he doing?” “It's the pastor,” Jon said as he opened the drivers side door and jogged into the graveyard. Owen, Kunzler, and Stan all followed him.

“Pastor Morgan! What's going on?!” Jon called, expecting the elderly man to answer. Instead, the pastor acted as if Jon wasn't even there.

As Jon neared the pastor, however, he noticed that the old man was standing before a grave..... an open grave.

The hell is this?, Jon wondered.

Soon, he and the other three men were close enough to clearly read the writing on the headstone.

It read: Jeremy Williams. Beloved son, and brother. Victim to the unholy children. By the grace of God, may he RIP.

Jon nearly had a heart attack as he stared down into his son's open grave and saw that Jeremy's coffin was also wide open, revealing the mostly rotted corpse.

“The ghosts from the devil's soul have once again been summoned upon the accursed land of Grovesford. May god help us. Amen.” Pastor Morgan held a crucifix above his head as he spouted off religious things, staring blindly forward... seemingly looking at nothing at all.

Jon starred furiously at the man. “What the hell is going on?” he bellowed.

The pastor continued preaching, “The eight demons from the ancient Celtic uprising have returned to state their claim on the bare innocence of the inhabitants of this place. May God save those that want to be saved. Amen.”

“Morgan!” Jon yelled. “What the hell is going on!?”

The pastor seemed to be in some sort of shock. “The eight demons shall sift unseen in and out of the forbidden shadows of the unholy, and spill the blood of our families over the lands. May God keep the faith strong. Amen.”

Having heard enough, Jon grabbed the pastor forcefully by his scrawny shoulders and jerked his body around so that they were face to face. Jon immediately knew that something was horribly wrong. The pastor's eyes were completely white, as if they had rolled to the back of his head, and were now stuck there. His face was drained of all color, and he looked to have aged almost twenty more years.

“Good God,” Kunzler whispered.

“Morgan,” Jon said. “Morgan?!”

“You can't know the unknown, Mr.

Williams. For, it is unknown for a reason.”

“What?” Jon asked, beginning to get worried.

“That which derives from darkness has no origin. Therefore, it has no end.” the pastor was slightly smiling now.

“I don't understand,” Jon said. “What are you talking about?”

“You don't understand?” Morgan asked. “Well of course. There is nothing to understand. But plenty to fear.”

Jon looked into Jeremy's open grave. He knew that his deceased son was laying in there somewhere, but all he saw was an immense darkness.

The pastor then pulled a gun out from underneath his robe. He dropped the crucifix, slowly backed away from Jon, and pointed the gun toward himself.

Neither Kunzler, Jon, Stan, or Owen said anything. All four men simply stared at the apparently delusional old man as he continued to smile.

“Now, I'll escort myself into the heavens. Before they get to me.” said pastor Morgan as he cocked the pistol.

“They?” Stan inquired.

“The cult?” Jon asked.

“The children,” pastor Morgan said. “They've come for victims. I won't be one of them.”

Kunzler attempted to remove the gun from the pastor's bony hands, but without warning, the old man pulled the trigger, ensuing a mess of a suicide as his fragile, aged body went stiff and limp all at once as it swayed sickeningly into Jeremy's open grave. As if this entire scenario was set up to be a gloomy mess of death and depression, it began to rain. Jon, Kunzler, Owen, and Stan all stood before the hollow hole that now contained two carcasses. Jon peered into the grave and, even though the thick blackness that made it nearly impossible to see anything more than a foot and a half inside, he was able to make out pastor Morgan's body. He stared at Morgan's head.... or what was left of his head, before motioning for the Kunzler and the rest to follow him back to the idling van.

Moments later, the four disturbed men were once again riding aimlessly around Grovesford in search of the druid cult. Neither of them had too much hope left at this point considering what they'd just witnessed and the fact that every time they believed they were on to something, the cult would yet again find a way to surprise them. In the span of time that he'd spent in Grovesford, Jon had witnessed more deaths here than he could recall over the course of his lifetime. Every other day it seemed that someone was either being hung, or tortured. Every other day, Jon's hopes would become even more shattered. He knew he was fighting a battle that he would inevitably lose. He just hoped that he would one day see Jacob again.

Jon continued to maneuver the van through the many deserted streets of Grovesford as the night began to die away ever so slightly. Owen had fallen asleep in the back, but Kunzler and Stan were all still awake. Stan remained still and silent as he sat in the passenger's seat watching every inch of landscape that they passed by, looking for any sign of the cult or other dangers. For a while, no one said anything. Then, suddenly, Owen jerked out of his sleep, seemingly angered.

“What the hell was that?!” he asked, looking at Kunzler with the widest of eyes.

“What the hell are you talkin' bout?” Kunzler asked, not bothering to look up.

Owen sighed, sensing he may have overreacted. “Look, just don't touch my leg while I'm sleeping. These past few days have been pretty long, and I'm damn tired.” Owen then attempted to re-enter his slumber.

Kunzler stared at Owen for a little while, wondering if there was something wrong with him. He eventually pushed the notion out of his mind and carried on staring out of the window. After about five more minutes of silence, Owen once again was strangely forced from his sleep.

“I thought I told you to quit touching my goddamn leg!?” he asked, aiming the outburst at Kunzler.

“Nobody is touching your leg! Holler at me like that one more time!”

“Will you both just shut the hell up!? I can't even focus on where we're going!” Jon fired, hoping to gain control of the ridiculous situation.

It seemed that they were indeed lost. The road in which the van currently rumbled down seemed virtually endless and the constant arguing of Kunzler and Owen helped the situation about as much as an abrupt attack from the cult would. Perhaps an attack from the cult would at least give the weary men something to think about as their minds collectively wandered off in chartless directions as their current situation became progressively aimless.

In an instant, however, it became suddenly life threatening. Owen was suddenly and violently forced from his slumber as something grabbed his leg and forcefully pulled his body to the void shadows of the back of the speeding van as he screamed in shock and terror. All at once, the cult burst from the shadows of the back of the van like a giant mad virus and assaulted the clueless individuals inside before they had a chance to comprehend what was happening. It was truly a mess as Jon was madly choked as his eyes and mouth were covered, cutting off his pathway to oxygen, forcing him to senselessly steer the large van and gasp for breath simultaneously. Kunzler was nearly knocked unconscious with a blow to the back of his head. He attempted to regain his senses before a druid could capitalize on the attack, but it was all for naught. He was swarmed with a barrage of strikes as the already unfortunate ordeal had become irreversibly worse.

In a desperate attempt to escape, even though the van was still speeding down the dark, foreign Grovesford roads, Stan unlocked and open the passengers side door as he began to quickly lose his senses. He attempted to prepare to jump out of the moving vehicle, but he too was mercilessly attacked. A druid grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him back into the van. It shut the door and turned Stan's body to face it. Stan was now incomprehensibly terrified as he was forcefully brought face to face with the maniacal red eyed 'face' of a seething druid.

“No! Please don't hurt me! I didn't do anything!” Stan desperately pleaded.

His plea was left unregarded. The druid continued to stare burning holes through Stan's soul before violently throwing him through the windshield, out of the van into the unforgiving night. Stan's body rolled multiple times before stopping about one hundred feet in front of the van. With what little consciousness he had left, Stan attempted to see if the van was on it's way to run him over, but to his luck, it was madly lurching in circles in the middle of the road a good distance away. He then figured that it would be in his best interest to attempt to get up and seek help before something horrible happened to either him or one of the men being assaulted by the cult. He slowly rolled onto his back while every movement of every muscle caused intolerable pain and agony. Before getting to his feet, he took a couple of deep breaths to ensure that he was indeed not dying. God forbid this be the way he go out. Finally, he slowly rose to his feet, all the while making sure none of his bones were broken.

The druids were absolutely relentless. Jon, Owen, and Kunzler were outnumbered like always, but this particular attack was insane.

“Stop!!” Jon attempted to scream between blows from the cult. “Somebody..... help..... us!!!”

Jon knew the van was virtually steering itself at this point, and he hoped dearly that it didn't crash into anything, but he also knew very well that there was nothing he could do about it at the time as his foot remained planted on the gas. He was being mercilessly choked and struck with repeated blows, and he was sure that if it continued, he'd be well on his way to reuniting with his deceased beloved.

After a few moments, Owen managed to emerge from the shadows of the back of the van and assist Jon and Kunzler in fending off the manic assailants. He wildly jumped onto the back of the druid that was choking Jon half to death and pulled it to the ground as it clawed and swung madly.

Jon took a very abrupt and very deep breath as he slowly began to regain his senses. He didn't know where they were geographically, or if they'd even managed to leave the spot they were in, but he was glad that he was able to see, hear, and breathe again.

"Where in the hell did these bastards come from!!?" yelled Kunzler as Owen frantically attempted to pull a druid off of him.

In an attempt to calm things down a bit, Jon brought the van to a screeching halt, got up, and attempted to help Owen and Kunzler get rid of the druids. It was no use, however, as he was once again viciously attacked without warning. The numbers game was simply too much for the men to handle and the cult was decisively proving that.

Suddenly, one of the druids jumped into the drivers seat and revved up the engine of the van. Jon managed to turn his head and see the horror for himself before he was struck again.

"No, stop!!" he attempted to yell out, but he knew that they weren't going to listen to him. He knew that they wanted to kill him, Owen, and Kunzler.

In the midst of attempting to avoid from being killed, Kunzler yelled out, "Wait, where is Stan? What happened to him?!"

Owen, who had stood up long enough to see out of the broken windshield, became frozen with terror. "Oh no," he whispered.

"What, what is it?" yelled Kunzler, inquiringly.

Suddenly, the van lurched forward with incredible force as the druid maneuvered the large, dark vehicle onward down the slick road.

Outside, Stan was in shock. He could only stand there and stare as the van clawed its way toward him at full speed. He slowly began to take small steps backwards, but the outcome of the current situation was disgustingly inevitable. He was about to be destroyed, right here in the middle of a barren road.

Over the past few months or so, Grovesford had gradually become the collective universal victim of ungodly attacks and murders such as the one that was, at the current time, nigh. Jon and Kunzler had done everything that they possible could have to stop it, but it seemed the harder they tried, the more brutal someone was murdered. Now, as the van, without a windshield, careened forward down the endless, dark road, they both attempted to yell at the very top of their lungs for either the druid to stop what it was doing, or for Stan to jump out of the way. But neither of those things happened. In fact, it was almost as if Jon and Kunzler's voices had been silenced, along with the loud rumble of the van's tortured engine. It was as if the only sound that could be currently heard was the deep, rhythmic beating of Stan's horrified heart as it thumped against his chest in mad fear.

Suddenly, all of the world around Stan went black. All of the thoughts were erased comfortably from his mind, and all of the feeling was drained from his body. Now, he only saw the violating, small red eyes of the druid driving the van through the broken windshield. They eyes of a demon. Suddenly, a very disturbing image flashed through Stan's mind. Those small red eyes furiously transformed into a large, violent creature with the face of a disturbing demonic monster. It shrieked and bellowed as its smile stretched so far across its narrow face, the corners of its mouth began bleeding. Then, the image was gone. It vanished right as the van ran into, and annihilated Stan irreversibly. Within seconds, Stan was nothing more than a mess of flying organs and spewing blood. As if matters couldn't get any worse, the druids, pulling yet another supernatural magic act, had vanished along with the image that burned Stan's mind right before he was hit. This caused the van to screech forward for about ten, fifteen feet before it hit something, flipped madly, and violently crashed. Inside the van, Jon Williams slowly drifted off into a state of complete unconsciousness.

XI.

The Ruins For about ten minutes, two little voices within Jon's mind began madly debating on whether or not he was dead. Part of him certainly hoped that he inevitably was. At least then, he figured, he would be able to see Carolyn, Rebecca, and Jeremy again. It was actually quite a wonderful thought, him being reunited with the majority of his family. He wouldn't have to deal with the pain of living in Grovesford any longer, or the cult that ravaged his soul. Unfortunately, as he heard the slight grumbling of Kunzler nearby, he knew that, as God would have it, he was still alive, left in this world to be further tortured and emotionally pillaged. Indeed, he was still alive. At least for now.

Figuring that staying in the overturned van would lead to nothing, Jon began to attempt to pry open one of the doors with his foot. The door was obviously and irreversibly destroyed, and it was stubbornly wedged into the side of the van. Jon was having a difficult time opening it, but after a few violent kicks of frustration, the door eventually gave in and Jon finally began crawling out of the wreckage.

As Jon slowly made his way out of the van and into the cold night time atmosphere, an extremely strong stench forced itself into his slightly bloody nostrils. With horror, he soon realized what it was. Looking down by his feet, Jon saw a heavy pool of darkly crimson blood tardily flowing from somewhere beneath the destroyed van, and he knew that the fluids belonged to Stan. It was virtually all that remained of him. As that sickening thought lingered within Jon's mind, Kunzler began busting open the rear doors of the van, attempting to get himself and Owen out.

"We ought to be dead by now." Kunzler was saying as he gingerly crawled out of the back of the van. "Shouldn't have to keep dealin' with the same stuff over and over again."

"Just hurry up and get out." came Owen's muffled voice from within the wreckage. After moments of brief dissension between the two, both were finally out of the van for good. However, that didn't stop them from arguing away.

"Maybe if you could have been a better cop, stuff like this could have been avoided." Owen was saying.

Kunzler eventually fired back with, "At least when I had a team, I managed to keep them from bein' massacred."

After a few more brief verbal

exchanges between the two, Jon finally spoke up. "We're lost."

"What?" Kunzler inquired.

"We're lost." Jon repeated.

The three men began to examine their surroundings with extreme caution, all the while hoping dearly that one of them knew where they were. But, as Jon had stated, they were lost. In the midst of the wreck that occurred moments ago, the van had seemingly careened off into a chartless area. Perhaps they were near a highway, but neither of them knew. Their surroundings consisted of a heavy amount of trees, most of them dead and leafless, dispersed randomly among an otherwise barren landscape. There was a slightly lingering noise about the air that one could not truly describe. It sounded somewhat like a slight moaning, however, at the same time, it seemed eerily non-existent. It was quite unnerving. Jon began to figure that perhaps they just crashed into a woodland area. But where were the animals? Birds, rabbits, squirrels.... none of them could be spotted or heard. After a short while of looking around, Jon's eyes came over something on the ground nearby. A bit of squinting eventually helped him realized that it was half of a dead coyote. The sight brought about a shivering chill to his skin.

"There's a path over yonder." Kunzler

finally said, pointing to a dirt path that led through a multitude of dead trees. “We probably oughta take it. Might just be our only way outta here.”

Mindlessly, all three of them began venturing along the aphotic path. As expected, paranormal things began to occur immediately. The moaning noise that was noted earlier began to become ever more audible, and ever more frightful. The three men kept on walking anyway, but they each exchanged looks as if silently asking each other if they were hearing the same thing. Judging by the looks on their faces, all three of them were hearing it.

“Maybe we should just turn around.” Owen said.

“No.” Kunzler replied. “Ain't nothin' back there that's gonna help us.”

“The road could be back there.” Owen said.

After a moment of brief thought, Kunzler replied with, “If you wanna go and see if there's a road somewhere back there, then go on ahead. Just don't expect us to follow you.”

“Besides,” Jon added, “the worst that could possibly happen is that we end up walking all this way for nothing only to reach a dead end. Then we turn back.”

Kunzler gave Jon a grim look out of the corner of his eye. “You really believe that's the worst that could happen? After all this time, and after all the shit you done been through, you believe that a dead end is the worst that could happen to us?”

“I know I'd like to believe that. Better than the alternative.” Owen said.

“Well, nobody is askin' you what you wanna believe. Y'all better get used to acceptin' the truth for what it is. There is a good damn chance that we're gonna die out here, and y'all know it.”

As the three men continued along the forgotten path, it seemed to them that the further they went, the more paranoid they became. It was as if they knew that they were going the wrong way, but it was their only option. There just didn't seem to be a right way. If they were to turn back and attempt to find the road, they would probably end up perhaps more lost than they were now.

Suddenly, as they blindly crept along, Kunzler noticed something only a few feet ahead of them. “Look.” he said, pointing.

It was yellow 'do not cross' tape, spread about the loosely wooded area. The tape seemed to go on forever on either side. It was what was on the other side of the tape, however, that intrigued the three wanderers.

“My God.” Kunzler said, breathlessly.

Beyond the yellow tape was what looked like the ruins of a small town.

“Well, I’ll be...” Owen murmured.

“What do you think it is, Kunzler?” Jon asked.

“Looks to me like a ghost town of sorts.”

“Some ghost town.” Owen said.

“Maybe we should cross the tape. Maybe we can find a road somewhere behind the buildings.” Jon said as the other two men obliged.

It was no standard ghost town. In fact, it resembled more of a forgotten grave yard. There were the remains of skeletons hanging off of trees by their necks, as if indicating that these were the victims of a mass lynching long ago. There were makeshift crosses sticking out of the eroded soil in multiple spots. The crosses also held skeletal remains upon them, from skulls, to arms and legs, to, rarely, full skeletons. Even worse so, there seemed to be fresh bodies here and there, bodies that seemed to have just deceased, bodies that were stripped of their skin, bodies that were tortured unrelentingly. Due to the amount of lingering death that poisoned the atmosphere, there was a horrid stench that emanated from the victims of assault and God knows what else.

“What have we gotten ourselves into?” Kunzler asked, speaking to no one in particular.

As the three men continued to slowly move about the ghost town as one, they began to realize that animals, probably rabid coyotes like the dead one they saw earlier, were sneakily roaming about, watching them. They'd spot the animals lurching over ledges and out of sight just as one of them turned their heads to look at it. After a while, a low growling could be heard coming from dangerously close by. The noise stopped the men in their tracks.

“What the hell is that?” Kunzler asked.

“We have to just remain calm. No one move...” Jon said.

Just ahead of them, a larger than average coyote slowly lurked from around a corner. As soon as it spotted the three men, it began to growl louder as it bared its blood stained fangs and prepared to launch itself at them. However, just as the unknown creature was about to leap, a whistling from close by stopped it from doing so.

The whistling continued. “Here boy. C'mon now. C'mon over here.”

The coyote took one last glaring look at the three frightened men before running off between the dark alley of two large buildings.

Whoever had summoned the animal could still be heard speaking. "There, there boy. See now? We don't need them folks. We already got ourselves some fresh meat."

"Hello?" Jon called out.

There was no response. Only a sickening laughter.

Jon and the others eventually continued on their way and examined the rest of the ghost town. They saw more of the same, bodies here and there, crosses, animals, and even heard whispers coming from the dark caverns in between buildings. Some of it began to add up. It seemed that there were cannibals living all throughout these ruins along with rabid animals and such. However, neither of the men knew what town this was, or who may have resided here. It was an eerie place indeed, and one could only imagine the kind of sickening unrest that would cause this place to convert itself into a barren, cannibalistic ghost town.

"We're going to have to find somewhere to hide. There are cannibals that lurk all over the goddamn place, and coyotes, and God knows what the hell else." Jon said, after he began to grow weary of wandering around.

"Why don't we just keep looking for the road? I don't want to stay here." Owen suggested.

"Because, we're lost. We've been

running around this place for what seems like forever. It's like we're going in circles. We can't keep wearing ourselves out. We have to find somewhere to hide and hope for the best."

"You mean we ought to hide, and hope somebody finds us before we're eaten alive?" Kunzler asked. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"If that's the way you want to look at it, then yes. That's the plan."

"Look, fellas, there has been enough mistakes on our part already. Too many people have already died. Why not try and at least save ourselves? We might as well just keep on looking for a road. We have nothing to lose," Owen said.

"You're absolutely right," Kunzler said. "We ain't got nothin to lose. So, why are you so afraid to die? Dying could be the best thing to happen to us."

"What?"

“Just so you know,” Jon said, “I don't agree with any of what Kunzler just said. I just think it'd be in our best interest to rest ourselves and hope that the authorities realize that we're missing.”

“And what if we don't make it to morning. Then what?” Owen asked.

“That's a chance we're gonna have to take, ain't it?” Kunzler intervened.

With that said, the three men eventually found their way over to a seemingly unpopulated spot where they would hopefully be able to rest without being dragged somewhere and mauled to death. They managed to fall asleep (with 'sleep' being used very lightly) and were undisturbed for the remainder of the night. The night skies were beautifully multicolored, like the senseless canvas of a confused artist with a clouded vision. The air was immensely silent and quiet still, considering the fact that there were cannibals and rabid, wild creatures lurking all about the shadows of these ruins. Perhaps the cannibals and such were silently watching the men as they “slept”.

Jon eventually opened his eyes and began to stare at the sky, as he just couldn't really fall asleep. There was just too much going on at once right now, and now that he had a moment to himself to think, he began to remember his family. He couldn't help but to understand the deep emotional void that rested within him. It was a terrible feeling, one that he didn't know how much more of he would be able to withstand. He missed Carolyn. The fact that she was dead tore him up inside. He missed his children. He couldn't believe that most of them were gone too.

Eventually, tears began to sting his eyes. He imagined that he could see his own reflection in the sky as he stared into it. He was a broken man. A shell of his former self. What kind of a parent am I? he wondered. I am no man. I let this happen to my family, and now, I'm paying for it. I deserve this.

“Can't sleep either, huh?” Kunzler, too, was wide awake.

Jon was slightly startled by Kunzler's voice, as it seemed to shatter the 'peaceful' silence that had existed merely moments ago.”Yeah. I, uh, I..... I'm not myself right now.”

Kunzler chuckled. “None of us are right now. I understand where you're comin' from. When they took my mother from me, I didn't know what I was gonna do. Hell, I thought I was gonna kill myself, but thank God that didn't happen.”

Jon had no response. He merely grunted.

“You know what though?” Kunzler continued. “You'll see your boy again. Yep. You'll see 'em again. I know you will.”

Jon closed his eyes for a moment. “That's if he's still alive,” he said.

“He's gotta be alive. When them bastards took my mother, and offed her, they left me alone for a while. They're still messin' with you. Maybe they're toying with you 'cause they know your boy is alive, and think you can't get to 'em.”

“Maybe,” Jon said.

“Maybe.”

“Guess we'll find out.”

“Guess so,” Kunzler said.

“You think they'll try to sneak up on us while..... IF we sleep?”

“I dunno. I can't say how they think. Or if they think at all. You'd think if they wanted us dead they'd killed us by now. Just look at what they did to your pal Stan.”

Jon remembered hearing the sickening crunch of Stan's bones being shattered as the van slammed into his petrified body. “Yeah. That could have been us.”

“Coulda. But it wasn't.” Kunzler then got comfortable in his spot, and closed his eyes. “I'm gonna get some shut eye. Lord knows I need it. Anyway, this is my way of lettin' them bastards know that I ain't scared of none of 'em.” The elderly man then bravely drifted off to sleep.

Jon silently wished that he could be as brave and fearless as Kunzler sometimes. The man seems to have been through all kinds of hell, and he let it show outwardly in every situation. Kunzler was the kind of man who laughed whenever danger presented itself. He's lived through it all, and you could see it in his face. Jon wished he could be like that. Perhaps then he wouldn't have to sit here mourning over the death of his family members. He then looked to the sky once again. He attempted to imagine what life would be like if he were able to stop all of the madness from happening. He imagined that he, Jeremy, Rebecca, Carolyn, Benjamin, and Jacob were all happily running around a local park. They were all smiling and having a wonderful time. But then, the cult emerges from nowhere and murders everyone but Jon. They leave the bodies strewn around the park ground as Jon is forced to stand there, frozen like a coward. Jon quickly shook the thought from his mind and tried again. He imagined that he and his family had taken a trip to a local theme park, and they were sitting atop a roller coaster, about to make the big plunge. However, something causes the entire park to shut down, and Jon and his family are stuck atop the ride. Then, the cult emerges from the other cars on the coaster and throw everyone but Jon out of the ride and down onto the pavement below. Jon is forced to sit atop the coaster and watch as his wife and kids splatter into a million bloody pieces, one by one.

No matter what happy thoughts Jon tries to force into his mind, the cult is always there to mess it all up. Now, instead of looking up at the beautifully entrancing night sky, Jon buried his sullen face into his dirty

hands. He then begins to sob silently to himself, as the emotional terror is too much to bear. He wonders why this is all happening to him. His life and everything that made it worth living had been stolen from him. And here he was, all alone, sleeping in the ruins of an unknown area with two people that he'd never even heard of a year ago.

After a while, Jon began to grow weary. He eventually decided that it would probably be best to attempt to fall asleep, even if it meant that he would be potentially eaten alive, or hung from a tree, or nailed to a cross in the process. It was worth the risk at this point, as he had virtually nothing to lose. Ideally, he very much wanted to see Jacob again more than anything in the world. He wanted to see his boy again with every fiber of his being. But, in reality, he knew that seeing Jacob again was just wishful thinking on his part. He knew he may never see Jacob, or anyone else again. In fact, he was ready to accept the cold fact that, once he fell asleep tonight, he may never wake up again.

XII.

Manhunt The street that Williams family home rested upon was sullen, dark, bare, and unforgiving. The home itself was a mess. Most of its windows had been shattered to pieces, all of the doors were ajar as if burglars had ransacked it, and there wasn't the faintest sign of life emanating from its premises. On a few occasions, residents threatened to burn it down with the notion that Jon Williams, like the rest of his family, was dead. The cops, however, deemed the residents insane. Sometime following the druids' latest attack, the authorities placed yellow barricade tape all around the site in an attempt to preserve what was still there. They believed that Jon was still alive, and they'd made it an objective to find him before it was too late.

"We'll die here." Kunzler said, staring blindly at the sickly blue sky.

Jon was caught off guard by it. "What?" he asked.

"I said we'll die here."

"Must be paranoia," said Owen as he scanned the surrounding area.

All three of them had managed to get as much sleep in the ruins as they possibly could, given the dire circumstances. They were all still incredibly exhausted, but the feeling that they were being watched kept them wide awake, even though neither of them truly wanted to be. It was about seven in the morning (they couldn't tell for sure) and there was a slight buzz in the air, a buzzing instinct that told the men that "others" were stirring. Cannibals were lurking. Coyotes were scavenging. The men were now prey to the creatures of this new environmental hell, and it turned out to be quite the stroke of luck that they'd not only made it

through the night unscathed, but they'd awoken at the hour they did, for if they had continued sleeping, they may not have chance.

“Unless either of you two have a better plan, I say we move from this spot. Probably not the best idea to stay here and let those things find us,” Jon said as he stood and stretched.

Owen nodded in agreement. “Right. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were snooping around right now.”

“Pssshh,” Kunzler mocked. “What will it matter if we move or not? They'll kill us anyway.”

both Jon and Owen stared down at Kunzler as he lay there still staring blankly at the sky. They shared the same inquiry. What exactly happened to Kunzler? He seemed to have just.... given up. He didn’t seem too motivated to try and, well, live anymore.

“Please, just get up and come on,” Jon said.

Kunzler tore his colorless eyes away from the sky and stared at Jon for a moment. Then, he said, “Get up and do what? Unless one of ya are sure that we can get outta here with our asses still intact, I suggest you not waste your time anymore.” The old man then returned his attention to the sky, it's faint blue being inertly drained by thick shades of depressing gray.

“We'll leave you here to die. We don’t have time for this. Now, I’ll ask you one more time to get your ass up and come on so we can find a way outta here.” Jon was clearly losing his patience. Every moment he spent arguing with Kunzler was an eternity's worth of time that a cannibal, coyote, or even a druid could be sneaking up on them.

Kunzler returned his eyes to Jon. “You're gonna leave me here to die?”

Jon said nothing in response.

Kunzler shook his head in disbelief. He slowly stood to his feet. “There isn’t anything we can do even if we truly wanted to, Jon. We've been running for our lives for too long. I’m tired of it. I’d rather die with my sanity.”

“And I want to see my son again.”

Kunzler saw a fire in Jon’s eyes that he hadn’t noticed before. The man was clearly serious about the words that escaped his lips. He clearly wanted to see Jacob again, and Kunzler realized that he was a fool for trying to stand in his way. “I apologize,” he said, shaking his head. “All of this has just gotten to my old head. I apologize.”

Jon felt pity for the old man. Here he was, the last years of his life, running from threats and death. Was it all worth it? “It's fine. We're all distraught by this. But we cant just give up. We just cant. We've come to far, I believe.”

A sudden crashing noise, like that of a bottle being dropped on concrete, startled the three of them. There was then the sound of footsteps, many footsteps, in the distance. Kunzler, Jon, and Owen all crouched on instinct, and began cautiously moving to better position.

“Yes, yes, I saw them, but I don't know where they ran off to. I'm sorry, just let me live and I can help you.” It sounded as if someone was being threatened.

Once they reached a small, dark area in a tall building in which they could remain out of sight and still clearly hear what was going on, the three men stopped moving and attempted to remain completely still.

“You fellas think 'them' is in reference to us?” Kunzler asked.

“You probably shouldn't even have to ask that.”

“You don't think it's the cult, do you?” Jon asked.

They continued to listen.

“I'm sorry,” the frightened voice pleaded. “I don't know where they're at.”

What followed was a horrid crunching sound and an animal's whimper.

“Why'd ya go and do that?” asked the frightened voice. “Why'd ya have to kill 'em?”

Kunzler began to worry. “You think they're threatening the cannibals?”

Owen, who had made it a point to remain silent, slowly raised his head to attempt to spot the activity. Only a mere twenty or so feet away was the group of druids standing in a very wide circle around what looked like one of the cannibals and a dead coyote with a deflated neck. Owen quickly returned to hiding as his heart nearly burst through his chest and into his lap.

“Well,” Kunzler said. “Was it them.”

Owen slowly put a finger to his lips and nodded. His skin was as white as a sheet.

Jon began to whisper, “We need to crawl outta here.”

But the only way outta here now,” said Kunzler, “is up.”

The three men glanced up into the decaying blackness of the rest of the building. There was a very old set of stairs that led to the top. It was their only chance.

Jon opened his mouth to tell the the other to to join him in making the ascent, but a sudden outcry of pain and terror halted that immediately. To their horror, the men realized that the cannibal must have been murdered. Now, they'd have to move fast in order to not be spotted. They slowly stood, and neither of them dared to look behind them in fear of what they could potentially see. They crept forward towards the staircase, making sure to not step on any pieces of glass, or anything else that would lead to them getting attacked. The way to the staircase seemed to be taking an eternity as they realized that the slightest mistake could be their last one. After a nerve racking amount of creeping forward, the three men had seemed to just reached the stair case. Before ascending, however, they all cautiously looked up at what they could possibly be getting themselves in to, but neither of them could see anything. It was complete, bare darkness from the fifth step onward.

After looking back at his comrades, Jon nodded to indicate that he would be the first to ascend. However, the moment Jon's foot touched the first step, all went wrong. There was a frightening, thundering noise coming from above and it seemed to be getting rapidly louder with every passing millisecond. Suddenly, the hellbent eyes of a rabid coyote could be seen emerging from the dark staircase, along with the rest of it's mangled body as it lumbered down and violently pounced on all three of the shocked men. Before they could react at all, three more coyotes blasted from the dark and attacked them. Unfortunately for Jon, Owen, and Kunzler, it was probably only a matter of time now until the druids caught wind of what was happening. They had to dispose of the coyotes fast if they wanted to stay alive.

Amidst the struggle, Kunzler surprisingly managed to kill the coyote attacking him by mistake. As it launched at him, he held his arms up in defense. When it tackled him, his arms wrapped around the animal's neck as they twisted and rolled around the floor. Eventually, he managed to twist it's neck to the point where it inexplicably snapped. In seeing that one of their kind had been killed, the other coyotes, realizing that they were outnumbered, began to slowly retreat, growling.

“That's right you bastards. Cry and run away,” Kunzler said.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of their troubles as cannibals began to emerge from just about every corner of gloom in the deserted building. There seemed to be nearly fifty of them, all viciously eying the three men with malice intent.

“Well,” Kunzler whispered to Jon. “Now what's your plan?”

Without hesitation, Jon responded with, “Stay alive.”

The current police chief in Grovesford, Robert Wells, was a man much unlike Kunzler. He was considerably younger with quite the optimistic demeanor. His hair wasn't thinning; in fact, he was a blooming blonde.

His stark blue eyes didn't seem the least bit intimidating, and one was to ponder how he managed to present himself to a potential criminal. Clearly, any criminal would take him as a joke of a cop. To the untrained eye, Mr. Wells seemed to be more of a novice pretty boy than a hardened cop. However, his comrades knew better. They knew that Robert was in fact a man not to be taken lightly. He wasn't a joke. Beneath his glossy appearance and closely cropped, vividly blonde hair was a man of many troubles. Behind those deceiving blue eyes of his was a dark history full of anguish, and while not quite as dark as former sheriff Kunzler's history, it was indeed unsettling.... as he described it.

“So,” Wells was saying, “we gotta dispatch some of our guys to the outskirts and beyond then. It's been hours and I'm not hearing any new reports on those lost men.”

After nearly five long hours of searching Grovesford up and down, Wells and his team managed to find absolutely nothing that would conceivably lead them to the whereabouts of Jon, Kunzler, and Owen. They had rendezvoused at the station where everyone inside was buzzing with anticipation at the situation. Never before had the team been so lost as to what they should do. Most of them still believed that the lost men were still very much alive, and they didn't want to give up on the search just yet. However, some of them felt deep down that all of the running around and interrogations were for naught. They felt that Jon, Owen, and Kunzler were long dead.

“Sir,” said a deputy. “Are you sure we should even continue searching? You don't think that after all this time, those men would be dead by now?”

Wells shook his head. “Now you know we don't talk like that in here deputy. We gotta keep looking for those men. Alright? And we're gonna find 'em. Dead or alive.”

In the few hours that had passed since the cannibals had attacked them, Jon and Kunzler had unfortunately managed to split up from Owen. Not only were they lost, but they had no idea where he was, or if he was still even alive or not. They had managed to trap themselves inside a small dark room in one of the deserted buildings. There were rats. There were spiders. There were strange noises. However, as long as there weren't druids, cannibals, or rabid coyotes, Jon and Kunzler were alright.

“I can't see a goddamn thing. Shit!”

“Sssh!! You wanna get us killed?”

In the short time that they'd been hiding in the small, dark room, Jon and Kunzler had continued to have small arguments. It would usually go with Kunzler being loud, and Jon telling him to quiet down. Jon knew that if it kept up, they'd be heard. However, as Kunzler had stated, it was unbelievably dark in the sour smelling room, and minus some small holes in the walls, there was no light coming from anywhere. The

two men could only huddle in the corner of the room against the rotting wall and hope that no one else was in the building with them.

“What do you think happened to

Owen?” Jon asked, fearing Kunzler's potential response.

“You probably don't wanna know what I think happened to 'em.”

“You're right.”

To their dismay, there wasn't even a door to the small room they were in, and if any of the druids were lurking about the long hallways, they wouldn't be able to tell due to how dark it was.

“You think we should get up and see if we can find him?” Jon continued referring to Owen.

Kunzler thought about it for a moment. “I dunno. At the same time, however, I don't see what we got to lose. Maybe if we're quiet, we can find him and try to get outta here.”

After counting to ten in his head, Jon began to sum up a bit of courage and told Kunzler to quietly follow him out of the room. Once the two men reached the doorway, they cautiously peered to either side to try and see if anyone was coming down the halls, but again, the darkness was too thick. They could almost feel it, as if it were a large, black wall instead of a sea of darkness.

Jon began slowly moving down the hall to the left and Kunzler began to follow him. Unfortunately, every step they made, no matter how light, was met with a lingering creaking sound. The all of the wood in all of these buildings was rotted beyond comprehension, and it was truly a miracle that some of the buildings still stood as they did.

“Dammit,” Jon said, breathing heavily. “We'll never get out alive like this. The damn wood is to old.”

“Then to hell with sneaking around. If those bastards were in here with us, they would have jumped out by now.”

“What are you saying?” Jon asked.

“I'm saying let's just find Owen and get the hell outta here.”

After exchanging nods of approval, Jon and Kunzler began to stride down the hall with false bravery. They walked down the hall for nearly five minutes before reaching a wall.

“Dead end, Jon said with disappointment.

“Shit,” Kunzler added.

Suddenly, very raspy breathing could be heard coming from down the hall. It sounded as if someone was either seriously tired, or seriously injured.

“What the hell is that?” Kunzler asked.

Jon slowly turned to face the way they'd just came from. He couldn't see anything, but he felt uneasy as the grating breathing got progressively louder.

“Oh shit. Oh shit,” said Kunzler as he began to panic.

The terrified men braced themselves for whatever was coming at them. There was not too much they could do since there was pure darkness in front of them, and a wall behind them. They could only pray that whatever was charging at them was Owen.

Suddenly, as the breathing abruptly halted, a figure, that of a man, could be seen standing just a few feet in front of them. Neither of them could clearly tell who, or what, it was.

“Owen?” Jon called out. “Is that you, man?”

“And if it's not Owen, then kill us now and stop wasting our time,” Kunzler retorted.

Jon shot a look at Kunzler, then proceeded to slowly move forward to whoever it was that was standing there. He wanted it to be Owen. However, a small voice inside his mind was telling him otherwise. Jon slowly began to extend his right hand in an effort to get the person's attention.

“Owen...”

Then, without warning, the thing violently whirled itself forward in inhuman fashion and viciously went for Jon's neck.

“They in there, Tim?”

“I dunno. Can't really tell what I'm lookin' at.”

“You sure you ain't lookin' hard enough?”

“Look who's talkin'. What have you found?”

“Hey!!” Wells had heard enough. “Can you two just search the area and stop wasting time!!!?? Christ!! It isn't a contest, and there are two men, potentially alive, lost somewhere.”

“Sorry sir.”

It was now nearly nightfall, and most of the Grovesford police team had managed to find the wrecked van that Jon, Kunzler, and Owen had left behind.

“Holy shit. Hey, there's a lotta blood under the van fellas. I think there might be a body under here somewhere.”

Wells quickly walked over to the deputy investigating the wreckage. “Where?” he eagerly asked.

The deputy pointed to the thick puddle of blood coming from underneath the van. “Smells like there may be a body under there, too.”

Wells sniffed the air and mentally agreed with the deputy. He dropped down to see if he could spot a body beneath the mass of wreckage.

“My God,” he whispered.

“You see something, sir?” asked the deputy.

The rest of the team had stopped what they were doing to listen in on what Wells had discovered.

“Yeah,” Wells said with a gravely look on his face. “There are.... pieces of somebody under this van. A hand, a forearm, part of their face.”

There was a long silence that followed. It was shattered by the loud static mumblings of one of the police radios from one of their cars parked around the crash site.

“You think it's one of them?” one of the deputies asked.

Wells pulled a small notepad from his back pocket and glanced over what was scribbled down on the yellow pages. “There were four of them,” he said as he closed the notepad and shoved it back into his pocket. “Four men were riding in this van. Now, we know one of them is dead. We'll have to assume the others are still alive. The search will resume.”

Some of the other team members exchanged sullen glances before getting back to the search. One of the deputies, however, didn't quiet think the search was worth it anymore.

“Sir,” he said. “You don't think those other guys are dead somewhere too? I mean look at-”

“THE SEARCH WILL RESUME!! !!”Wells bellowed.

Now, everyone was doing something, whether they wanted to or not. Wells placed his hands on his hips in frustration. Granted, they did manage to find the van, and one of the bodies. Parts of one of the bodies anyway. However, he couldn't shake the aching feeling that they were very close to what they were looking for. Yet, he had no idea where to go from here. That is, until he noticed a wavering path among a grassy underbrush just beyond the crash site.

“Fellas,” he said, squinting with determination and anxiety. “Stop what you're doing. Make sure you're all armed, and follow me.”

It was now nightfall, and while they had managed to evade death for this long, Jon and Kunzler were still on edge about the current mess that they were now in. They were trapped now in the upstairs part of one of the abandoned buildings and they hadn't seen Owen since earlier on in the day. They were quite sure that there must have been cannibals, coyotes, and perhaps even the cult lurking somewhere outside, sniffing them out.

“You think they can get to us up here? Kunzler asked as both men stopped to catch their breath.

“That's not what's important. We need to focus on how we're gonna get down from here.”

Suddenly, yelling could be heard from below, from outside. It didn't sound like anyone was in any kind of trouble, and it didn't sound inhuman or abnormal in the least. In fact, to Jon, it sounded a hell of a lot like Owen.

“You hear that?” Jon asked, excitedly.

“Huh? Hear what?”

“Sssh. Listen.”

As the two tired men listen to what Jon claimed to be hearing, their spirits, as one, were lifted.

“By God, you're right. It does sound like Owen. Where's it comin' from?” Kunzler asked, looking around frantically.

Jon stood up and attempted to follow the sound of Owen's voice. It lead him over to large hole in one of the walls.

“There. He must be outside,” Jon said as he cautiously made his way to the hole.

To his relief, it was indeed Owen, wondering about the ruins, searching for his lost comrades.

“Jon, Kunzler? Where in the hell are you guys?” he was yelling as he waled aimlessly, clearly lost.

“Owen, we're up here!!” Jon yelled. It didn't take long for him to get Owen's attention. “Listen, stay where you are! We'll come down to you!!”

“What?!”

“I said, we're coming down there!!”

In what proved to be much easier said than done, Jon and Kunzler eventually, although unconventionally, made their way down out of the building. They managed to rendezvous with Owen, and even though the trio had only been separated for a few hours or so, to each of them, it felt like an eternity.

“What the hell happened? You guys didn't leave me, did you?” Owen asked.

Jon examined Owen's face, but he couldn't tell if the man was being serious or not. “No. We were separated by chance. We must have ran in different directions when the cannibals had us cornered.”

“You didn't happen to find a way outta here while you were wanderin' around, now did ya?” Kunzler asked him, dearly hoping for Owen to just say 'yes'.

“Yeah, that's why I came back looking for you two. It's a good thing you hadn't been killed.”

“Wait..... you really found a way out of this place? You found Grovesford?” Jon asked.

“Well, no. I didn't find Grovesford. I found a road. I figured that was good enough.”

“Well,” Kunzler said. “What the hell are we waitin' for? We'd better peel out now before they realize where we are.”

Owen nodded. “Alright, follow me then. The cliff is over here, right around this way.”

“Cliff?” Jon asked as the three of them began quickly walking to where Owen was leading them.

“Yeah. As it turns out, there's a cliff that leads down to the road. I think the road might lead to a highway later on, but I'm not sure.”

“How far is the drop?” Jon asked.

“Pardon me?”

“The drop to get down to the road from the cliff you found. How far is it.?”

“Let's just say, we'll live, but we'll probably have to bleed to do so.”

“Small price to pay,” Kunzler said.

They continued moving along, not wanting to give the cult or the cannibals a chance to spot them. All of them, however, knew that that was just wishful thinking. They knew that it as only a matter of time...

“There's the cliff, just up ahead,” Owen said, pointing.

“Yeah. Yeah, I see it,” Kunzler said. “I say we make a run for it.”

Without further hesitation, all of them began madly running for the cliff, feeling every increasing moment become one of unbearable suspense. Suddenly, from seemingly out of nowhere, Jon was blindsided by one of the rabid coyotes. The wild beats crashed into with incredible force, sending the both of them rolling towards the cliff.

“Jon!!” Kunzler called out as he watched the scuffle unfold.

Owen and Kunzler attempted to run and stop the inevitable from occurring, but it was no use. Jon couldn't pry himself free from the animal's vicious grip. It's thick, black claws were dug deep into his arms, and it's jaw fill of razor sharp teeth was furiously opening and closing, trying to rip off a large chink of Jon's horrified face. Eventually, however, both Jon and the rabid animal knew what was about to happen when it was far too late to stop it. They both, while still in a struggle, rolled off of the cliff.

“Jon!!” Kunzler yelled again.

Jon and the large coyote were both struggling now to get the other to remain on the bottom, in a desperate attempt to save themselves and use the others body to break their fall. There was mad clawing, gnawing, cries of pain, and everything in between.

Eventually, however, at the very last second, Jon managed to wrap both of his arms around the coyotes neck and use that to make sure that he wasn't the one to come in direct impact with the rocky ground below.

There was a horrid crunching of bones, deflation of air from lungs, and whimpering cry of serious pain as they landed. Once they hit the ground, the two were forced apart. Tho coyote was killed on immediate impact, and Jon wasn't too well of himself, but at least he was alive. After rolling for about seven feet, Jon began to waver in and out of consciousness. He began to believe that he was becoming delusional as he thought he was hearing..... sirens.

Up on the cliff, Kunzler watched in horror as Jon and the coyote made a nasty impact with the rocky ground below. He was slightly relieved, however, as Jon appeared to be alive. He was even more so relieved as the a flurry of vivid red and blue lights and loud sirens washed away the darkness and dread that had, only moments ago, constricted the atmosphere.

“Thank God,” he said, pointing. “The cops.”

“You can say that again,” Owen said in relief as the two men began waving their arms to get the authorities' attention. However, as they did this, the both of them inexplicably let their guards down as if they had forgotten that they were still on the cliff. And they paid for it. Out of the darkness that still plagued the world behind them, one of the cult's druids shot forward with an axe, and struck Kunzler in the back of his head with the end of the wooden handle. Kunzler was immediately knocked unconscious, and his limp body fell in a lifeless, sickening motion toward the rocky ground below.

Owen watched, frozen in fear as the cops burst from their cruisers with guns and lit flashlights shining all over the place as they yelled up at him. Their words, however, were foreign to him. All he felt now, was fear. Right before it was too late, Owen snapped back to reality just as the druid wielding the axe (Jon's old axe) swung it at his head with incredible might. Owen managed to duck just in time. He could even feel the cold, steely blade brush across his scalp take a few pieces of hair, and perhaps some skin with it. In the act of avoiding decapitation, Owen lost his footing and slipped off of the edge of the cliff, nearly suffering the same fate as Jon and Kunzler. He managed, however, to hang on for dear life.

“Let go!!!” the cops below were only trying to save his life. “Let go!!!”

Owen didn't want to let go. If he did that, he'd die. But if he held on..... he would be murdered. Owen, having never felt such an incredible sensation of unmitigated fear in his life, slowly looked up and was met with the absolutely ungodly image of all eight druids standing at the edge of the cliff, glaring down at him. Their collective body language oozed of pity for the poor man as he struggled on the cliff, having to chose between two violent forms of death.

“LET. GO! !!!!!”

The cultist wielding the axe slowly lowered it down and brushed the cold blade against Owen's sweaty cheek, as the horrified man shivered with terror. Even though it's face was covered by the tattered hooded cloak, there was a vivid, sickening feeling about it's demeanor..... as if it were smiling..... as if it were enjoying this.

“LET GO! !!!!!!!!”

For a split second, Owen thought about letting go. There is always the chance that I live and suffer minor injuries, he thought. He didn't want to do it, but he knew he had to.....

It was too late.

As thunder and lightning ravaged the murky purple sky above, the cultist raised the axe high above it's head and following a moment's pause, the unholy monster brought the wicked weapon down with malice, and the blade planted itself right in the center of Owen's skull. The life was immediately drained from Owen's body as his hands involuntarily released their grip on the cliff, and he began falling..... the axe still in his skull, blood rushing over his forehead, his eyes rolling slowly to the back of his head with a look of terror permanently fixed on his pale face, he fell.... and kept falling, and falling.....

..... and falling.....

..... and falling.....

.... andfal lling.

XIII.

Dead End “Get over there and help them.

Somebody call an ambulance.”

“But sir, the druids...”

“CALL AN AMBULANCE!!!” Wells had become hysterical.

A couple of wary deputies, along with Wells, ran over to the area where Owen, Jon, and Kunzler had all fallen while the others stayed back to contact medical assistance.

“We're gonna need an ambulance over near the ruins, ASAP!! There are three victims right now! We aren't sure of all of their conditions. We know one of them is dead!!” One of the frantic deputies yelled into a walkie talkie as he attempted to gain contact with help.

Wells kneeled down beside Jon's seemingly lifeless body and placed a hand on the man's shoulder, gently shaking it.

“Sir, are you alive?” he asked.

At first, Jon said nothing. However, after a few moments, he began to stir.

Wells was indeed relieved to see that Jon wasn't dead, but the stinging reality of the recent assault still remained a troublesome thing for Wells to completely swallow. He'd only been leading Grovesford's police team for a short while now, and he never thought he'd have to witness a murder. At least not this soon.

"Listen, we're gonna call for help and get you outta here, alright?"

Jon winced as he spoke. "What happened?" he asked. "Where's Kunzler?"

"It's alright," said Wells. "We have everything under control."

"Sir?" it was one of the deputies.

"What is it?"

"This one is still alive, too."

The deputy was referring to Matthew Kunzler, who had, like Jon, survived the fall and awakened from his slight state of unconsciousness.

"Damn," Kunzler said as he slowly sat up. "God damn."

"Sir, yo might not want to--"

"Get your hands off me. I don't need your help."

Kunzler then stood to his feet on his own power, but was clearly feeling the effects of the blow to the head and the fall. The man was indeed durable for someone of his age, but mentally, he couldn't shake the cold feeling of being knocked unconscious and nearly killed from his mind. It absolutely enraged him. Kunzler took a long glance up at the cliff that the druids had attacked them on..... but they were no longer there.

"You took a hell of a fall, sir." said one of the deputies. "You sure you don't want to just sit down and wait for the ambulance."

Kunzler glared at the deputy, then down at Owen's body. It was a disturbing site. "I don't need no ambulance," Kunzler said. The old man then walked away towards the congregation of police cruisers.

Jon eventually managed to stand to his feet, and when he did, he slowly walked with Wells and the deputy to Owen's body. What they saw was uniquely indescribable in each of their own eyes, and they'd never forget what they were looking at. Jon shook his head in utter disbelief. He recalled allowing Owen to stay with him to assist with the situation with the cult, and he recalled regretting it the very moment he shook Owen's hand. He knew that he was placing Owen's life in serious danger. But is it my fault, he asked

himself. Is it my fault that Owen is dead now? Perhaps it was. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, Jon knew that this incident would haunt him for the rest of his life.

At around midnight, Wells had assigned one of the deputies to escort Jon and Kunzler back to Grovesford in a cruiser. This

came to fruition after both Jon and Kunzler had convinced the doctors that carried Owen's body away that they didn't need any medical assistance. Although the doctors didn't quite agree with them, they were allowed to be taken back to Grovesford anyway.

The three men, Jon, Kunzler, and the deputy traveled in silence down a long, dark highway for quite a distance. There were a million things on the minds of Jon and Kunzler, but they couldn't focus on just one. Too many people had died or been killed at this point. They'd sacrificed too much already. What more could possibly be done to them, besides being murdered?

After a while, the deputy spoke up. "I assure you guys, it's all over now."

at first, neither Jon nor Kunzler responded, but like always, Kunzler had something to say. "I assure you that it's far.... far from over now."

"What makes you think that?" the deputy asked.

"There's a couple reasons. The most important one being that Jon and myself are still alive. With them druids..... the bastards.... there's always fun to be had with us."

They drove on in silence for a little while longer before the deputy responded to Kunzler's claim. "Well, I understand that the both of you are shaken up a bit right now. But, we have most of our team back there looking for the cult. It's pretty much a guarantee that they'll be found and dealt with," the deputy stared hard into the haunting dark before the cruiser. It seemed everlasting, yet it drew him forward. It was somewhat entrancing. "They couldn't have gotten too far."

"Most of the authorities are currently at the ruins?" Jon asked, worried.

The deputy looked back at Jon through the rear-view mirror. "Yes sir. Why?"

Jon was going to explain the deputy why sending all of the police to the ruins at once was a serious mistake, but instead he just smiled. He knew that the cult would be long gone before the police even had a chance.

The deputy noticed Jon's smirk. "Something funny about that?"

"Not at all," Jon said. He knew another attack was inevitable, and imminent.

They, once again, drove on in silence for a good distance before either of them spoke up again.

Kunzler had a question on hand. “So,” he began, “I get the feeling that the ruins weren’t just always there. What the hell is that about?”

The deputy cleared his throat. “Well, you're right. They weren’t always there. That whole area used to be a part of Grovesford.”

“What happened?” Jon asked.

“Like everything else that goes wrong with Grovesford, the cult happened. A while back, a good while back actually, the cult assaulted that area. They caused a massive plague that had citizens violently rebelling against the town and turning to cannibalism.”

“Good lord,” Kunzler whispered. “How was it stopped?”

“Well, if you're referring to the cult..... they were never stopped. But the cannibals? The sane citizens saw no other way than to stop those sons of bitches other than by burning the whole place down. So they did just that. They burned down that entire area. It was beautifully violent.”

“And that was it?” Kunzler asked.

The deputy chuckled to himself. “If only.” He rubbed his chin while remembering what he was told about what occurred next. “I might have this a bit mixed up, but if I remember correctly, the cannibals opted to stay in the ruins since they were wanted dead by, well, everyone. They eventually tried to get revenge and overrun the sane part of Grovesford after a few years, but they were all thwarted by law enforcement. Since then, the bastards have resided in those ruins indefinitely.”

Jon and Kunzler exchanged glances.

“I'm guessing you too had a run in with some of the cannibals, huh?” the deputy asked.

“Sure as hell did,” Kunzler said. “We sure as hell did.”

“Well,” the deputy said as he tightly gripped the steering wheel, “we probably won't have to worry about them. The cowards haven't left the ruins in years.”

The thought of the cannibals back at the ruins was not effectively burned into the minds of Jon and Kunzler, but not out of fear. The men tried to imagine the image of the cult causing a massive plague that would cause so many people to go insane and revert to cannibalism. There must have been hundreds, and perhaps thousands of cannibals back there hiding in the caverns and abandoned rooms of those rotting buildings, waiting for moments when some unsuspecting victim would wander off into their visceral playground.

As Jon and Kunzler sat in the back seat of the humming police cruiser, time ultimately passed them by, and when they were finally able to break free from their conflicted thoughts, they discovered that they had, miraculously, made it back to Grovesford.

“And home sweet home,” the deputy said as they sped passed the kudzu infested 'Welcome to Grovesford' sign.

They managed to only make it twenty

six feet past the Grovesford welcome sign before things, once again, took an expected turn for the worse.

The deputy began to gradually bring the police cruiser to a steady halt. He squinted as he noticed something..... eerily strange up ahead. “What the hell is that?” he pondered aloud.

Jon Kunzler both averted their attention to whatever it was the deputy was talking about.

“What?” Kunzler asked. “What is it?”

The deputy wiped a light fog from the slightly blurred windshield. He then was sure of what he was looking at, however, he simply couldn't believe it. “It's an ambulance,” he said. “Idling in the middle of the road..... about fifteen feet in front of us.”

Kunzler cracked his bony knuckles. “Can you see anyone? Is there somebody inside?” he asked, worriedly.

The deputy had to squint, not because of any fog or impairment of sight, but because of the blatant darkness that leered within the ambulance. He could make out the steering wheel, although barely. However, he couldn't make heads or tails of who, or what, was behind the steering wheel. “Can't see a damn thing,” he said.

All three men inside the police cruiser sat in silence and stared out at the ambulance through the windshield, unsure of what to do next. The ambulance, as the deputy had stated, was idling in the middle of the road, right on the center line. Was someone in trouble? Were, whoever they were, just stopping to deal with something? If so, why would they stop in the center of the road?

Suddenly, the sirens and lights all over the ambulance shot on for about five seconds, then shut back off. It seemed darker than it had been. Much, much darker.

“I might have to go check it out. Somebody could be in trouble,” the deputy proclaimed.

“Yeah, somebody could be in trouble,” Jon said. “Us.”

“What are you implying?” asked the already bothered deputy.

“That could be the same ambulance that was at the ruins. The one that collected Owen's body.”

The deputy didn't protest. He simply continued to stare forward at the ambulance. It was then that he noticed the one aspect of the ambulance that all three of them should have seen earlier. Owen's body, with Jon's axe still wedged into his skull, was tied to the front of the ambulance.

“Buckle your seat belts. We're getting the hell outta here,” the deputy said as he feverishly prepared to dive on past the strange ambulance.

Jon and Kunzler eventually noticed what gave the deputy such a fright, but they didn't buckle up. They knew better. They prepared to jump out of the cruiser if necessary.

“I don't know what the hell is going on, but we're not gonna wait around to find out-”

Whatever the deputy was going to say next was cut off by a violently loud roaring noise. It came from the ambulance, as its engines were revved up and its lights once again turned on, washing away the menacing darkness with vivid shades of red and blue. The sirens pierced the silence of the night, and the obvious danger of the situation became ever so present.

“What should we do?” the deputy asked.

His question, however, was never answered. The ambulance finally made its move and began to speed madly towards the three frightened men sitting in shock inside the police cruiser. Without thinking, the deputy eventually threw the cruiser in reverse, and they blindly sped backwards down the dark road, attempting to evade collision with the large ambulance as best as they could.

As the machine rumbled towards the horrified men, they all couldn't help but stare at Owen's desecrated body tied to the front. Owen's skull looked as if it was ready to split completely in two, and the more the ambulance roared on with him tied to it, the further into his skull the axe sunk. It was a disgustingly eery sight, but neither of them could look away. Owen's eyes were completely rolled to the back of his head, exposing nothing but deathly white between his eyelids. His face was otherwise stuck in the state of sheer terror that it displayed when he was eventually murdered by the cult. It was like watching something out of a well done horror film, but the sickening reality of it was ironically unreal.

“My God!! We're gonna die!!” the deputy was agitated beyond belief.

The ambulance continued to speed towards the retreating cruiser, and it looked as if the deputy would be right in saying that they were all going to die. However, Jon had other plans.

“Look, we've gotta jump outta this car!” he yelled to Kunzler.

“What?!”

“We don't have any other choice!! Gotta take out chances!!”

Kunzler briefly thought about it. In the end, he knew that Jon was right. He was either going to remain in the cruiser to be crushed in a destructive collision, or he could take his chances and see if he can survive another life threatening death stunt.

“We don't have time to think!!!” Jon yelled as he gripped the door handle.

Kunzler noticed that the ambulance was quickly gaining on them. Suddenly, one of the eight druids burst from the windshield of the blaring ambulance and viciously dived straight for the windshield of the windshield of the cruiser. The deputy screamed in terror as the druid broke through the windshield with ease and savagely attacked him.

Kunzler didn't need any more reasoning. He wasn't going to wait until the druid noticed them. Immediately after the druid burst through the cruiser's windshield, he opened his door and leapt for his life, soon followed by Jon. At the very second that the two men made the leap, the ambulance, finally catching up with the cruiser, crashed right into the smaller vehicle, immediately igniting an incredible explosion. Kunzler and Jon landed in a small patch of grass next to the road as the carnage behind them unfolded. They rolled for about ten or so feet before stopping and recollecting themselves.

Jon eventually stood to his feet and watched the mass of metal burn away. “We couldn't have gotten any luckier,” he said, breathlessly.

“Damn right, Kunzler responded. “And as a bonus, there's a druid fryin' in there too.”

Jon, however, didn't share the same excitement about that in particular. “Let's not jump to conclusions yet. We haven't been able to kill any of them. For all we know, it could still be alive.”

“Then I suppose we best get movin' then.” Kunzler then turned and began walking the way they were originally headed. Jon soon followed.

The two lone men trekked the dark path back to an even darker world, Grovesford, Alabama. One may question why they would want to go back to Grovesford now, but there was no definite answer to that question. While they knew that they would be very well placing themselves in even more surreal danger, they knew they had to go back. That was a sure thing. Just as sure as Jon knew that he had to see his baby boy again, just as sure as Kunzler wanted to see the cult burn in hell, and just as sure as the seething druid slowly rising from the fiery carnage behind them was still very much alive.

XIV.

The Black Maze When you have been absent from a place for a long amount of time, whether it be your home or someplace, it feels incredibly different once you return. Sometimes, it may feel awkward or uncomfortable. Other times, it may even feel foreign. Now, as Jon Williams and Matthew Kunzler walked wearily into the deathly silent, and incredibly serene residential area of Grovesford, Alabama, they felt horribly unwelcome. It was a very nagging feeling. They both felt as if the town itself resented their return..... as if they were very much unwanted.

The two men became highly bothered by the tranquility of the atmosphere, so they stopped walking. Something just wasn't right.

"It's quiet..... and calm," Jon said.

"Too quiet and too calm," responded Kunzler.

A dog could be heard barking in the distance.

"What now?" Kunzler asked.

"My place," Jon said. "I'm sure there will be something there that will invigorate us."

Jon and Kunzler walked at a steady pace down the calm streets towards the Williams home. The further they went, however, the more Jon thought that maybe going there wouldn't be the best thing for them to do. He figured that since most of the cops had stupidly swarmed the ruins, the cult must be lurking about Grovesford, quietly waiting for their chance to strike. Since there was no longer any law enforcement to stop them, the cult must have felt even more empowered to cause harm.

"You know what?" Jon said. "I think going back to my house may be a bad idea."

"Uh-huh. Why is that?" Kunzler asked.

"The deputy said most of the cops were at the ruins. The druids have to be lurking around Grovesford now."

"And?"

"And if we go back to my place, they'll kill us. Without a doubt. Don't you see? There aren't any cops here to protect anyone. What's stopping the cult from attacking us right now?"

"Well, what do you suppose we do?"

The truth was, Jon didn't know what to do exactly. They were bound to be murdered, unless there was someplace they could hide....

"The sewers," Jon said.

"What about em?" Kunzler asked.

"We have to hide in the sewers. It's the only way to avoid the cult. They'll expect us to be at my house, so we can't go there. We can't risk being seen by them at all."

Kunzler stared at Jon for a moment as they continued to walk down a lowly sidewalk. He contemplated whether or not Jon had become mad or paranoid, but he eventually thought about the situation, and ultimately agreed to hide in the sewers.

"Alright," Kunzler said. "We better find a manhole then."

Jon and Kunzler walked casually up to an intersection of streets and homes. In the center, there was indeed a manhole, but neither of them was too excited about having to go down there. In the end, however, they both knew that if they wanted to live, they'd have to do it.

"Alright," Jon said. "Help me lift this damned thing."

The both of them bent down to gingerly lift the manhole cover from the ground.

"Whew!" Kunzler exclaimed. "We could die just tryin' to breathe in this junk!!"

"Be a man," Jon said. "This is a small price to pay if we live."

Jon, although very gingerly, lowered himself down into the hole and began climbing down the rusty ladder into the

nearly intolerable sea of sewage. Kunzler was soon to follow. When they reached the sewer floor, both of them stood for a while in order to get somewhat used to the stench, and feel of being in such a proverbial wasteland.

"This probably isn't the most sensible way to evade danger, considering the fact that we both could potentially leave here with some kind of nasty disease," Jon said. "But, at least we'll live."

Kunzler merely sighed. "I gotta tell ya," he said. "Your plans are startin' to get more and more.... what's the word I'm lookin' for here..... senseless."

A smirk broke across Jon's face. "Well, when you start coming up with them, let me know."

Suddenly, the few dim light that burned inside the sewer began flickering.

“We'd better not stay in this spot. Better keep moving,” Jon said.

They reluctantly moved along, each man keeping close to a wall in order to guide themselves forward. As they moved, the infested water beneath them splashed and splashed all over the place, causing strange echos throughout the hollow tunnels. The noise caused the men to believe they were hearing sounds that may or may not have been real, and it frightened them slightly. Neither of them knew where they were going, and neither of them wanted to get lost. In order to lighten the mood, Kunzler began deeply humming a tune. Jon was relieved, since this was also a way for him to know that Kunzler was still nearby. The dim lighting throughout the sewers wasn't even enough for him to see Kunzler across the tunnel, and he feared that eventually, the lights would go out due to some freak occurrence.

As if every ounce of bad luck had been used against them, the lights of the sewer suddenly shut off, leaving both men in yet another situation where they were forced to rely on their other senses to keep them alive. What made it all worse was that Kunzler had suddenly stopped humming.

“Kunzler, you still over there?” Jon called out.

“I don't know where I am,” Kunzler said. “But at least I can hear ya.”

“Right. We just need to try and stay together. If we get separated in here, who knows what kind of stuff will happen to us.”

“Let's just keep on walkin' forward. We'll eventually find another manhole so we can climb the hell outta here.”

“Alright,” Jon said as they splashed along.

Up ahead, Jon didn't see any lights shining through a manhole cover. He couldn't see anything. In fact, he wasn't even sure if they were walking down a tunnel anymore. For all he knew, they could be heading straight for a wall or something. He was sure of one thing, however. The cult must have been in there with them. Somewhere, lurking about the dark tunnels of this filthy sewer, the cult, all eight of the volatile bastards, were slowly making their way towards Jon and Kunzler.

Never before had Jon felt more out of his own mind than this very moment, right now. He knew that what they were doing was, as Kunzler had put it, senseless, but nevertheless, the one thing that drove him onward was that if he were to in some manner succeed in evading, or even destroying the cult somehow, he might see Jacob once again, and that was all he really wanted. As he continued to splosh forward through the sewage, images of his family splashed through his mind. He missed them dearly. He missed his wife's warm smile, he missed Jeremy and Benjamin's looney mishaps, and he missed Rebecca's typical mood swings. But they were all dead right now. They were all no longer here with him, and it burned him deep down

inside to think of it. He could barely even go on remembering them without seeing the image of the cult burning Rebecca's body on the cross.

It angered Jon to remember these things, but unfortunately, these were the most recent moments the he shared with his family. Death, murders, assaults, these were the most recent things that Jon Williams had experienced, and these were the things that poisoned his mind. They poisoned his soul, and Jon knew deep down that the only thing that would wash away the negatively that consumes his well being was seeing Jacob again. That was all he ever wanted.

Kunzler, whom had also been delved deeply into some thoughts of his own, remembered his own family. However, every time he did, images of the druids would pop all over his mind. Kunzler wanted nothing more than to send them, all of them, to hell so they could suffer the centuries of anguish that they'd unleashed upon Grovesford. He wanted them to be tortured, raped, beaten, and hung. He wanted to be the one to make sure that the deaths of thousands upon thousands of helpless individuals were rightfully avenged. Now, as he walked forward through a dark sewer, his hands trembled in rage. His heart began to beat much faster, and he could feel hot blood boiling up within him. Years and years of sickening destruction is all Grovesford really knew. Perhaps it would be all Grovesford ever knows.

“Hey Kunzler, I think we ought to stop and try and figure out a plan, huh?” Jon said, but was met with silence.

“Kunzler?” he called out once again.

Nothing but the steady dripping of sewer water.

“Aaahh, shit!” Jon said, frustrated.

It became clear that the two must have wandered in different directions, and now, they were in serious danger. Neither of them knew the way out of the sewer, and both would undoubtedly remain lost for an indefinite period. This was not something that either of them had originally anticipated. But now, the horror was a reality. The cult had the both of them right where they wanted them.

As Jon continued to carefully walk forward through the black, suspenseful atmosphere, the dim lighting of the sewer slowly turned themselves back on.

“What the hell.....?”

Jon looked around to see if Kunzler was anywhere nearby, but the old man was nowhere to be found unfortunately.

“Just perfect,” Jon exasperated.

He then began to hear a strange, eery, soft laughter echoing off the tunnel walls.

“Hello?” he called out, to no response.

The laughter, however continued. It remained very soft, yet it grew a little bit louder every few seconds.

“Is anyone out there?” Jon called again.

This time, he was met with a response: “Dada?”

Jacob. It was Jacob. Jon’s heart began racing as he involuntarily began to speed walk forward to the sound of the laughter.

“Jacob?!?” he called out.

Now, it sounded as if the laughter was growing softer.

“JACOB!!”

Jon found himself jogging now. If the laughter was indeed coming from his son, then he'd have to hurry to find him. Unfortunately, in the back of his mind, Jon felt that this was some kind of sick trick. A joke. He felt as if he were being played like a fool. But he kept running forward. Joke or no joke, trick or no trick, he had to take the chance. He had to see Jacob again.

After a while, Jon found himself going madly in all kinds of directions. He wasn’t sure what way was left, right, up, or down, and the laughter that he'd heard earlier was now, slowly, beginning to sound more.... demonic.

“JACOB!!!!” he yelled out.

“Dada? Dada?..... Dada???”

Every time “Jacob” said the word dada, his voice became deeper, and more alien. It was more like the voice of a demon than the voice of a human child. Eventually, Jon couldn’t take it any more. The alternation of Jacob’s voice was too much for him to bear.

“DDDDAAAADDDAAA!!!!” it screamed in an incredibly unnatural fashion now.

Jon covered his ears and fell to his knees. “STTTTOOOOPPP!!!!”

Now, the sickeningly soft laughter returned, and it, too, sounded unnaturally demonic and altered.

“Heheheheh... HAHAHAHA,” it bellowed as it mocked Jon’s suffering.

“NNNOOOOO!!!” Jon began sweating and shaking due to the paranormal unrest.

“DDDDDDDAADDADDADDDDDAADA DADADDADA!!!!!”

“NNNOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Suddenly, all was calm. The noises had stopped but Jon was still on his knees in the sewage with his hands clasped over his ears, and his eyes shut tight. The laughter still remained inside his head for a little while, but he eventually was able to shake it off and return to his senses. After assuring himself that it was just a mind game, Jon slowly stood, unclasped his hands from his ears, and opened his eyes. He immediately wished he hadn't.

In front of him now stood a grisly sight. Somehow, the bodies of his deceased family members had been brought into the sewers. Now, they were hung from ropes tied to the sewer ceiling, dangling foolishly, the rotting bodies all completely naked. With every fiber of his being, Jon wanted to look away, but he just couldn't. In fact, he was in a sever state of shock. The skin on the corpses were a sick bluish color, and some of the eyeballs had been plucked right out of their sockets. They were missing all sorts of appendages. The bottom of Jeremy's skull, due to the extreme way he was killed, was split in two in a horribly strange manner. Rebecca was absolutely unrecognizable. Carolyn's body looked to have been violated immeasurably. There even seemed to be pieces of Stan tied from the ceiling also.

Jon immediately vomited. As he did so, he didn't even bend over. It simply pushed his lips apart and spewed from his mouth, all over the front of his shirt, and down into the already sewage filled water.

Back at the ruins, Wells and his team were having no luck finding any of the druid. There were no traces of them anywhere. In fact, besides a few run ins with a cannibal and some coyotes, nothing sever had occurred since they'd been at the ruins. Wells now feared the absolute worst. Something deep within him told him that the cult was either headed back to Grovesford, or worse, they were already there.

“Hey, listen up!” Wells said, getting the attention of everyone on his team. “We're gonna need to wrap all of this stuff up and continue the search in Grovesford.”

“Continue the search?” protested a deputy. “We've been searching all night!!”

Wells, clearly bothered by the way the deputy responded, sighed. “We haven't found anything, deputy.”

“We found those three men. They're being escorted back to Grovesford. We can just assume that the cult is gone now.”

Wells walked casually up to the deputy and stood right in front of his face. “My daughter is only six years old,” Wells said. “That's a mighty early age to die at, wouldn't you agree deputy?”

The deputy simply looked down at the ground as the rest of the team looked on in silence.

Wells continued, “I'd like to see my little girl grow up and become a woman. I'd really like to see that. But, if I let all of you,” he paused to look every team member in the eye. “If I let all of you go home right now and call off this search, there's a good chance that I may never get to see my little girl grow up at all. Yes, deputy, we found the victims. But the victims are only half the reason we came out here in the first place.”

“I'm sorry, sir,” the deputy said.

Wells simply looked the deputy up and down. “Everyone, wrap this up and get in your cruisers. The search resumes in Grovesford.”

“JON!!!” Matthew Kunzler knew he was lost, but that didn't stop him from searching for his friend. He felt that Jon was in serious trouble, and he was right. Yet, so was he.

Kunzler had been wandering through the seemingly endless maze of tunnels that the sewer held, and he didn't feel like he was anywhere near Jon, or a manhole. It was a good thing for him that the lights had been turned back on, but they were dim in the first place, and he couldn't see much of anything.

“Bastards,” Kunzler said under his breath. “Goddamn bastards.”

Kunzler then suddenly found himself in a similar situation to the one that Jon had fallen victim to, however, his situation was a bit more..... real.

“Good God...,” Kunzler said as his jaw hung open.

He had stumbled into a dead end, but it wasn't the vile, slimy sewer wall that had him in a stupor. It was what was heaped against the wall.

“No...,”

The murdered members of Kunzler's family, like Jon's, had been dragged into the sewers by the cult no doubt, but rather than being hung from the sewer ceiling, they were all thrown up against the wall, piled sloppily up on one another. A pool of thick blood slowly streamed from somewhere within the nauseating pile of bodies and flowed down the arm of what looked like Kunzler's wife, into the gutter water. Kunzler simply placed a hand over his mouth, as he didn't know what else to do. He didn't vomit like Jon, but he felt all kinds of ill now.

All of a sudden, dark shadows began crawling up over the sewer wall and the bodies piled against it, and Kunzler suspected that the shadows were coming from something behind him. Rather than panicking, however, Kunzler slowly exhibited a grin. It wasn't a blissful grin, but a grin signaling that the old man had finally gone utterly mad.

“So,”he said, speaking to whoever, or whatever it was standing behind him. “This is how it ends, huh?”

Kunzler then slowly turned around to address the entrants, but he already knew who it would be. And he was correct. Looming behind him now were two of the unholy druids, mutely standing there with their tattered cloaks and hellish demeanor, seething with evil.

Six police cruisers sped down a lengthy road towards Grovesford, Alabama, as their sirens blasted in junction with the vivid red and blue lights that illuminated the night atmosphere. The men maneuvering the cruisers were now certain of the horrific terror that potentially lurked about their township after finding the destroyed, burnt carnage that was left behind when the ambulance crashed into one of their other cruisers on a lone road. It was now painfully clear of what they had to do: get to Grovesford before anyone was inexplicably killed.

The night skies were whisked with whips of gray streaks of clouds that formed into nearly horrifying images. Some of the gray clouds resembled very mad looking faces, while others took form of strange looking creatures. The night air was brisk and unnerving as it seemed to grip the material objects that nestled throughout it. All in all, it was an uncomfortable journey back to Grovesford for the authorities to say the least, and they couldn't help but believe that once they did finally get there, it would become even worse.

Kunzler had very narrowly managed to escape the clutches of his pursuers, and was now running for his dear life throughout the dark underground. He didn't know where exactly he was going, and he didn't really think that mattered, but he knew that as long as he kept moving, he would at least avoid being killed down there. At least, he hoped so.

Kunzler continued to keep up his running pace for as long as he could, however, he eventually began to grow absolutely exhausted and knew that he would have to either slow down, or stop altogether. He began breathing heavily and roughly, all the while trying to keep his voice quiet in order to not give the druids a clue to his whereabouts. The old man eventually had had enough and opted to try and find a safe spot for him to hide for as long as he could. However, as luck would have it, Kunzler mistakenly stumbled into Jon.... or what he thought was Jon.

The sight of Jon laying against the wall in the sewage was not pretty one. While it was bad enough that the two men had to hide underneath Grovesford like this, Jon didn't seem to care. There was a dried vomit all over Jon's clothes, and from the waist down, he was wet with sewage. It was repulsive, but Kunzler knew that he had to get him out of there.

"My God," Kunzler said as he went to help Jon to his feet. "Damn good thing I found you....."

Although Jon was incredibly weary, he was conscious. "Don't know..... what happened..... druids..."

"Yeah," Kunzler said as he placed one of Jon's arms over his shoulders. "Same here."

Suddenly, the soft laughter of a baby could once again be heard, but very faintly. It didn't bother Kunzler, however, as he wasn't going to wait around to be attacked again.

"Gotta find a damn ladder and climb outta here."

While supporting Jon, Kunzler dragged himself onward through the tunnels of the dim sewers, looking for any means of escape that he could find.

"There's nothing in here. They must have gone somewhere else."

"Yeah, either that or they're dead."

The group of authorities had finally made it back to Grovesford, and the very first place that Wells had instructed them to search was the abandoned Williams home. Searching the place wasn't at all a difficult thing to do, considering that there was barely anything left in the house. It was mostly bare, minus a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and the cops went through it with a breeze, although they found nothing.

Wells, who had the feeling that Jon and Kunzler were still alive, simply refused to stop the search. "They're in Grovesford..... somewhere. We're gonna find them."

Wells then walked out of the house and stood on the front porch. As his eyes scanned the many homes and front yards that were settled around the Williams house, a cold wind began to sting his face, and he could here a faint humming about the air, as if there was some sort of haunting going on. Experiencing this, Wells couldn't help but think of how messed up Grovesford truly was. It sure wasn't like any other normal town. There just always seemed to be something.... wrong.

"Sir," called a deputy, breaking Wells' train of thought. "Do we keep searching this house, or is there another plan?"

For a long minute, Wells didn't respond to the deputy's inquiry. In truth, he didn't really know what to do. He didn't know where to look for Jon and Kunzler. Yet, he

wasn't ready to give up.

"Sir?" the deputy asked again.

Wells placed his hands on his hips and walked off of the Williams home's front porch. He walked until he reached the sidewalk that met the black road.

"Uh..... sir? Everything alright?"

Wells wanted something..... anything that would lead him to the whereabouts of Jon and Kunzler. One person had already died tonight at the hands of the cult. He didn't want to have anyone else suffer the same fate. He could only pray silently that he would be lead to where Jon or Kunzler was.

Then, right at that very moment, his prayers were answered. At first, he heard a splash. It sounded like water, but he didn't have a clue where it was coming from. Then he began hearing more splashes and what sounded like yelling. The sounds were muffled and came at Wells from a distance. The man looked around the area, and his eyes were eventually locked on a manhole cover leading sown into the sewers about twenty or so feet away, at an intersection of roads.

Kunzler had done everything he could to avoid the druids but it was no use. The only good about the situation was that Jon had finally managed to walk on his own power. Both men were now jogging steadily away through a dark tunnel, but they couldn't see anything more than three feet in front of them, or behind them.

"HELP!!!" Kunzler yelled, hoping that by some miracle, someone was walking near the manhole.

Dead end. They'd reached yet another dead end, and finally, they'd given up. There was nowhere to run anymore, they couldn't see anything, and they figured that it just wasn't worth it anymore trying to survive.

"HELP!!!" Kunzler yelled again, his voice echoing off the hollow tunnel walls.

Suddenly, they could here the splashing of water just beyond them. It sounded as if someone was walking towards them, and they hoped to God that it was a cop, or a citizen.

Splish-splosh.

Whatever it was, it grew closer.

Splish-splosh.

There was a misty fog that evaded from the hot sewage below, and both Jon and Kunzler could now see the figure of someone emerging from it.

Splish-splosh. Splish-splosh

The figure methodically drew closer, and closer.

Splish-splosh. Splish-splosh.

The figure suddenly stopped in front of them. They couldn't tell who or what it was, but they could tell it was holding something. Or someone.

"Hello??" Kunzler called out, his voice trembling with fear.

The dark figure (a druid) then slowly outstretched it's lanky arms, displaying what it held.

It was Jacob.

"Nooooo!!!" Jon yelled as he lurched forward.

Suddenly, from seemingly out of nowhere, the second druid dropped down from the sewer ceiling and struck Jon with incredible force, sending him flying backwards into Kunzler. The impact of the blow caused both Jon and Kunzler to fall down in to the sewage. They could only look on now, as the two figures of death stood there, marveling over Jacob as if he were their son instead of Jon's, and neither Kunzler or Jon himself could do anything about it.

"Jacob! 1" Jon said as he attempted to scramble back to his feet. "Nooooo!!!"

However, in yet another paranormal instant, Jacob and the two druids had vanished completely.

"My son.....," Jon said as he stood

there, staring down the dark tunnel, the image of Jacob burned into his mind. "My son."

Kunzler stood to his feet and just as he did so, a manhole cover was lifted from above.

"They're in here, sir!!! We found 'em!!!"

Cops lowered themselves down into the sewers to assist both Jon and Kunzler out. They'd been rescued, and they'd lived through another assault..... but they'd also seen Jacob. There he was, Jon's little boy, in the cold hands of a demon.

“Come on, sir. you're safe now,” said a deputy, tapping Jon's shoulder.

Jon didn't know what to do. He stood inhumanly still for a while with an expressionless face, staring into the abyss that the two druids had vanished to. Only mere moments ago did was his son just four feet in front of him.

“Sir? You can climb out now,” assured a deputy.

Jon didn't budge.

“You see something, sir?” the deputy asked, following Jon's gaze.

Finally, Jon snapped back to his senses. “No,” he said.

Jon then reluctantly made his way over to the ladder that led out of the manhole. He took one last long look into the black maze, but there was nothing there. Nothing there at all..... as far as he could tell. With a sigh, Jon began climbing out of the sewer, unaware of the three silent figures, cloaked by extreme shadows, watching him as he returned to a place just as dangerous as the one was leaving behind. There was a mutual feeling shared between Jon, Kunzler, and even the cops as they wrapped up the search and cleared out. The horrors were far from over.

XV.

The Unveiling Groveford, shaken up by recent events, seemed more like a demon's haven now than ever before. The cult had tormented the streets and neighborhood of the tortured town for years, but never had they opted to attack anyone in the sewers. However, that was more than likely due to the fact that no one has ever opted to hide in the sewers.

Following the paranormal destruction that took place, authorities had taken it upon themselves to completely drown themselves in any and all information regarding the cult, their murders, and perhaps create a surefire plan to finally stop them and put an end to the years of horror. They brought along doctors, judges, supposed friends of victims, and anyone else that they believed could be of help. They'd mapped out all of the cult's most recent whereabouts, recorded all recent murders in notebooks, and spend days doing

vigorous research into the criminal history of the town. All of it may have seemed like a bit much, but the citizens and authorities alike had finally had enough. They wanted it all to end.

Down at the Grovesford police station, Wells and his team were fishing through mounds of paperwork regarding the history of Grovesford. Typically enough, the only things discovered throughout the paperwork worth noting were murders that took place. The vast majority of the murders recorded were dealt by the cult in some fashion or another. Here and there they'd find something that indicated that someone was eaten alive by a cannibal, but those were rare and didn't interest anyone on the team much.

"A lot of this stuff is interesting," Wells was saying as he sifted through a pile of papers. "But all it really confirms is that the cult has been attacking Grovesford for years. There doesn't seem to be a reason, or any probable cause as to why that may be."

One of the deputies, who was also looking through a large pile of papers, couldn't help but agree. "Right," he said. "I mean, I think we already knew most of this stuff, minus a few extreme details."

Indeed, all they were really finding were records of murders. They already expected various murders to have taken place, and all they were truly discovering were more and more accounts of murders. Withal, perhaps that was all they needed.

"You know," Wells said. "The more I stare at these records, I get the feeling that a lot of them have something in common."

"Like what?" a deputy asked.

"Kidnapping."

The rest of the team stopped what they were doing to look at Wells and each

other. "See," Wells said, holding up a random record sheet. It read:

[Conferred below is an elucidative collaboration of subject matter from various medical specialists and law enforcement officials that have, over a very prolonged amount of time, gathered what they could about the terror that seems to unrelentingly attack Grovesford, Alabama at random. It should be noted that while not all of these fatalities and conflicts could be confirmed, we as a township must wholeheartedly presume that all of them are, indeed, fact.

Date, time, and location unknown - Warnings of unhallowed activity spread abroad. Details are exceedingly scarce.

Date, time, and location unknown – An infant is kidnapped from its home by unknown, unseen assailants.

Date, time, and location unknown - Thirty six (36) individuals are discovered brutally massacred and shredded to multiple pieces.

Date, time, and location unknown – A family consisting of a man, a woman, and their four (4) year old daughter are all stuffed into a chimney and lit on fire. There are hardly any remains.

Date, time, and location unknown – An entire collection of homes is blown to pieces by unknown explosives/arsonists.

Date, time, and location unknown – Nine hundred and fifty seven (957) farm animals are drowned in an acid bath. An unsuspecting line of victims is forced to take turns consuming the concoction. All of them were found dead.

Date and time unknown – An infant is kidnapped from its home.

April 17, 1715 – A strange plague causes the citizens of Grovesford to go mad. Some of them revert to cannibalism. In retaliation, the entire town is burned down.

May 5, 1767 – An infant is kidnapped from its home.

January 6, 1790 – An infant is kidnapped from its home.

October 23, 1800 – One hundred (100) woman are captured, skinned, and eaten alive by a group of cannibals.

January 13, 1801 – An infant is kidnapped from its home.

July 4, 1850 – A collection of school children are burned to death in their sleeps.

March 5, 1851 – An elderly man, who is rescued from the clutches of the unknown assailants, is able to describe them before he dies of shock. “Demons. It was the demons...,” was what he said before his sudden death.]

For a long while, no one within the station said anything. They simply had to think in silence about what exactly all of this meant.

Finally, Wells broke the silence. “So, we can all agree that the cult's actions lead them to kidnapping peoples children here and there, right? ”

Most of the deputies nodded in agreement, while others were still very much deep in thought.

“Well, let's try and put these pieces together. We know they're a cult.”

“Right,” a deputy said.

“So, being a cult, they have some sort of.... regimen or... what's the word I'm looking for here...”

“Worship?”

“Yeah,” Wells said. “That will do. Worship. Being that they kill people, their dedication must point towards satanism.”

“Maybe those kidnappings have to do with some sort of ritualistic practice,” a deputy offered.

“Maybe,” Wells responded. “It makes sense.”

Wells figured that someone, sometime ago, must have come to the same conclusion that his team had, and he feared that like before, it would lead to absolutely nothing.

“Look,” Wells said, stacking the papers he'd been looking through. “Whatever the reason may be, this town had been the breeding ground for murders, with a cult at the center of it all. Right now, our primary focus is to put an end to it. It has to stop. It has to.”

Wells glanced down at the record sheet full of murders atop the pile he'd stacked. He knew deep down that he'd have to give his life if he wanted to do anything that would bring peace to Grovesford. Even then, he figured, it wouldn't matter. There was something unnervingly supernatural about the way the cult operated. There wasn't a flaw about them, and they acted as a singularly thinking unit instead of separate minded individuals. Surely at some point during their tenure of terror they'd been struck with bullets. Although no one could confirm it, it seemed as if every member of the cult was immortal. However, there was always the mystery of why they opted to kidnap infants at random time periods. No one that has had an child kidnapped was able to get them back. No one has even come remotely close. Perhaps, as speculated by one of the deputies on Wells' team, it was all part of their inner workings as a cult. As disturbing as the thought may have been, perhaps they weren't just kidnapping children, but were hand choosing substitutions for their fallen.

XVI.

Corruption “Mommy, what does 'murder' mean?” a young girl called out as she stared curiously at the sudden news broadcast that abruptly replaced the show she had been viewing.

“What did you say Susan honey?” her mother asked in response as she casually made her way into living room to see what her six year old was going on about.

Susan pointed at the television screen, which displayed an uptight anchorman speaking directly to Grovesford while a black and red banner went across the bottom of the screen that read: This is not a warning.

“Oh my God... Frank, come in here!”

“Debra? What is it dear?” said a mid aged man wearing round glasses as he made his way into the living room with his wife and daughter.

“What is all this about?” Debra asked as she stared at the screen.

The reporter was saying: Due to recent conflicts that have occurred in staggering quantities as of late, police have asked all citizens of Grovesford to please remain in your homes with all of your doors and windows locked. This is not a drill. This is not a joke of any kind. This is simply the law's way of preventing further lives from being taken.

“What the hell?” Frank said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his bony nose while listening to the reporter.

Once again for those just tuning in. This is not a drill. This is real, folks. Stay behind locked doors, and remain there until notice is given. A heavy search will take place here in Grovesford over the next couple of weeks at least, and it is strongly advised, for your safety, to remain off the streets indefinitely.

“We're going to need you two to remain here at the station while we execute this search. You'll have all the guns you'll need in case something goes wrong.”

Jon and Kunzler had been kept from residential areas every since the sewer incident. Wells didn't feel it was safe, or smart, to have them go back to the Williams home. As Wells had put it, been there, done that.

“We're going to spend the daylight hours searching and monitoring Grovesford, and the night at the ruins and so on.” Wells said.

“What if something happens while you all are at the ruins?” Jon asked, noting the last time this type of dilemma occurred.

“You'll just have to try and use these old walkie talkies. There isn't a guarantee that you'll get a signal since we'll be so far away, but it couldn't hurt to try, you know?”

Kunzler didn't like the idea. “Remember what happened when the lot of ya were at the ruins before? We nearly died, in case y'all forgot,” he spat.

Wells placed his hands on his hips. “There just isn’t enough of us to disperse. They repeatedly manage to overwhelm us now. If we split the whole team up, it’ll be unanimous. We’d all be dead.”

What Wells was saying was indeed the truth. No matter what, the druids always seemed to have the upper hand in conflicts. If they were to split up the police force, they’d be methodically dismantled, and that wasn’t an option.

“So we all can agree on the plan here?” Wells asked. “You two,” he said, referring to Jon and Kunzler, “will shoot to kill if anything goes wrong here while we’re searching elsewhere. Everyone with me, shoot to kill, period.”

Silently lurking within the bowels of Grovesford, in the sewers, was the minacious cult. They had cleverly chosen to remain in the sewers, as they anticipated that no one would think to hunt for them there. They knew that everyone would scamper to the ruins, and they knew that if they waited long enough, they’d be able to surface from the below and seize the town.

It was now about midday. Various heavily armed cops searched the remaining bits of Grovesford as they all prepared to make their way to the ruins. There was an unsettling silence that gripped every single corner in Grovesford as the last of its citizens cleared the streets, entered the safety of their homes, and locked all door and windows. Every soul knew that this was do or die time, and none of the citizens wanted anything to do with a potential flurry of bullets that could very well fly around later on.

“I think that’s everyone,” a heavily armed Wells said as he looked on as a man entered his home in the distance. “I think the streets are cleared.”

Wells and his team now stood in the middle of a street where, on either side, was a line of homes. To them, Grovesford felt like a ghost town, and they all knew that it could very well become one if anything went wrong.

“Have we searched everywhere?” a deputy asked. “I think we have.”

“Yep,” Wells said in response, checking his watch. “But we’re no gong to the ruins yet. Still too many hours of daylight left.”

“Should we go and check on Williams and Kunzler?”

“Nah,” Wells said, gripping a holstered pistol handle tightly, his knuckles bulging against his leather gloves. “Like I told them, they have all the guns they’ll need in case anything goes wrong.”

One of the deputies began to question the absurdity of their current actions. “You don’t think that they’ll actually have to use those guns do you?” he asked.

“In fact,” Wells said, “I expect them to.”

It was now dusk. The older the day grew, it seemed, the quieter Grovesford became. There was not a soul wandering the streets, and the unnerving silence that the town knew so well remained present. In just about every single home in every neighborhood on every street, weary residents had their televisions tuned in to the twenty four seven news broadcast, in which the nervous anchorman continued to give updates on the wavering situation. Some of Grovesford's residents were simply a bit nervous. They didn’t want to die, but most importantly, they didn’t want their children to die. Most other residents, however, were on the brink of going over the deep end. They'd pace restlessly back and forth as they listened to the anchorman's cold, fear filled face, and listen to his quivering voice as he spoke about the severity of what was going on.

“Mommy, are gonna die?” asked young Susan as she studied the worried expressions of her parents as they all sat in the living room to heed the news broadcast's warnings.

“No, honey. Absolutely not,” Debra responded to her overly curious child.

“Maybe we shouldn’t keep sugar coating everything, dear. Maybe it's time to stop lying to her,” said Frank as he nervously rubbed his bony hands together.

Debra was taken aback by the comment. “What!?” she exclaimed inquiringly. “Are you saying we should tell her that we're all gonna be murdered?”

“What does 'murder' mean mommy?” asked Susan.

Frank stood from the chair he'd been sitting in. “No, Debra. I’m simply saying that this situation isn’t a joke. Maybe now would be as good a time as ever to let Susan know that.”

Debra, too, stood from the couch she'd been sitting on. “Come on, Susan. Let's go eat some ice cream.”

Susan hurriedly stood from the floor and ran into the kitchen. Debra gave Frank a look of pure disgust before following her daughter.

“Debra, come on. You and I both know that I mean well. We just gotta stop sugar coating things when we're around Susan is all,” Frank called into the kitchen.

As expected, there was no response. All he heard was Debra trying to Susan to think of happy things. With a sigh, Frank sat back down in a chair to avert his attention back to the news broadcast. He was immediately entranced with the wealth of information that the anchorman fed to the viewers. His mind wasn't on Debra and Susan anymore, but on real life. He knew that until further notice was given, they were all in great danger. And....

Suddenly the television screen went black, and Frank realized that it had been turned off. Being forced from his train of thought, Frank blinked furiously as his eyes darted across the room until they stopped on Debra holding the remote control, standing next to the television set.

“Did you hear me?” she asked, annoyed.

“What? No, what did you say?”

“I asked you to turn this garbage off. I'm sick and tired of Susan asking me what words like 'murder' and 'slaughter' mean.”

Frank sighed and slowly stood to his feet. He then casually placed his bony hands on his wife's shoulders. “Honey, all of that stuff is real life. Not that fairy tale happy stuff that you stuff into her mind.”

Carolyn sharply removed his hands. “Frank, she's six.”

“Debra, one of us could very well not live to see tomorrow. What will Susan think if that happened, huh? That one of us was kidnapped by a unicorn?”

Debra placed a hand on her forehead and rolled her eyes. “You're being ridiculous,” she said. “I think you're blowing this whole thing out of proportion.”

Frank was dumbfounded by his wife's comments. “Blowing this out of proportion, huh? Well, how's this for blowing something out of proportion; two men were nearly killed trying to escape the cu-”

Debra then abruptly placed one of her hands over Frank's mouth. “Sssh!!” she hissed. “We're not going to talk about that in this house, alright?”

Annoyed, Frank began walking angrily towards the front door.

“Where are you going?” Debra asked as she followed him.

“I figured we could talk about it outside, unless that's against the law, too.”

“What?!” Debra exclaimed. “You can't go out there you idiot!! We were told to clear the streets!!”

Frank loudly laughed. “Well, you know what, Debra honey? I think you're blowing this whole thing out of proportion.”

As Frank continued laughing heartily, Debra could only stand there and stare at him in disgust. There he was, out on the front porch like a fool.

“You know what? Fine. Go ahead and make jokes, Frank. If you need me or Susan, we'll be in here.” Debra began to close and lock the front door, but was interrupted by her husband.

“What? Honey, you're not locking me out of the house, are you?” he asked.

“Why not?” Debra sarcastically asked. “I thought it wasn't safe out there, but I was apparently just blowing this whole thing out of proportion!” she said as she slammed the door shut.

Debra sighed and turned around to get back to Susan, but was horrified to find one of the cultists towering over her.

She screamed for her life and stumbled backwards.

“Debra, what the hell was that? Debra!?!?” Frank yelled from the outside as he beat on the door.

Susan was absolutely frozen in with nauseating fear. She didn't know what she should do. Then, however, she saw that, behind the hooded cultist before her, the rest of them were standing side by side, with Susan.

Debra wanted to scream with all of her might, but what escaped her lips, was nothing. She simply watched as one of the cultists bent down to whisper something into little Susan's ear.

“Ooohhh.” Susan said. “So that's what murder means.”

Then, without any wasted motion, the foreboding intruder that stood lankly over a horrified Debra slowly revealed an improbably lengthy, glistening knife from beneath his coal black, tattered cloak, and as Debra attempted to scream one more time, the cultist violently shoved the knife clean through her throat.

It had finally reached nightfall in Grovesford, Alabama, and Wells team of police had all gone off to the ruins to continue their search. The starless skies were a sickly purple color, and the brisk winds that lightly blew through the streets stung with anticipate and fear. While it was definitely quiet, the silence was everlastingly deafening. It was unnatural to say the least, and even though everyone was safely in their homes with their children in bed and their doors securely locked, no one could shake the feeling that something was simply not right.

Over at the Grovesford police station, Jon Williams and Matthew Kunzler both sat in an office washed over with vividly bright fluorescent lighting. They'd been listening to updates from Wells and his team through the hand held radios for as long as they could, but eventually, as Wells had predicted, the signal became mostly static.

Kunzler turned his radio off. "That's enough of that," he said, calmly.

"Right," Jon responded as he, too, turned his radio off.

"You don't think they were in any kind of trouble, do ya?" Kunzler asked.

"I don't care about them," Jon said as he stood from his black spinning chair and walked over to a window to peak through the blinds. "I saw my son, Kunzler. I saw him again like I wanted."

For a while, Kunzler said nothing in response. He scratched his chin and finally said, "Yeah. But it's best to not get over excited, hear?"

Jon closed the blind and placed his hands on his hips. "Tonight will be the night," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Tonight will be the night I get Jacob back from those freaks. It'll be me and you taking down all of them, no matter what. Tonight will be the night."

Kunzler nodded in agreement as the two men shook hands. They'd been through a lot together already, and they both knew that whether they succeed or not, tonight would be vital turning point.

"Guess we oughta turn on that ol' news broadcast," Kunzler said as he grabbed a remote sitting on a nearby desk. "Thing's been runnin' all damn day. They must got somethin' interestin' to say now."

Unfortunately, to Kunzler and Jon's shared horror, he was right. There was something interesting on the broadcast, but it wasn't the anchorman; he had been murdered and was slouched in a bloody mess over his desk. The cult, as they saw, had managed to override the broadcast, and now stood side by side in the center of the screen. However, it wasn't just the fact that the cult had killed the anchorman and corrupted thousands of television sets. What ultimately took Jon, Kunzler, and all of Grovesford to new heights of fear as they all watched on was that the cult had kidnapped three little girls from their homes, and currently held them hostage.

Unfortunately, no one on Wells' team was aware that Jon and Kunzler were trying furiously to contact them with the out of date walkie talkies. In fact, their radios weren't even picking up any remote signal period.

They were all oblivious to the real danger that was occurring miles and miles away. Yet, they still searched around the ruins, soon realizing that the entire area..... was empty.

“So, we haven’t found the cult,” Wells said. “But where in the hell are those cannibals?”

One of the deputies looked at Wells and shrugged. “All I know is, this isn’t good. It isn’t good at all.”

“Is anyone else getting anything with their radios?” another deputy asked. “Mines not getting anything. It's next to useless out here.”

Everyone else checked their hand

held radios, but experienced the same disappointment when they discovered that none of theirs were getting any signals either.

“Dammit,” Wells said under his breath.

“You think we should go back to Grovesford, sir?” a deputy inquired.

“I don’t know,” Wells coldly responded. “I'm afraid of what we might find.”

Three children had been kidnapped. All of their parents and relatives had been pitilessly killed. There were no cops currently anywhere near ten miles within Grovesford. Everyone that was still alive could only sit in their living rooms and look on at their television screens in fear and pity. Some of the residents could only imagine what it would be like if their own children were there now instead.

Jon and Kunzler didn’t know what to do. They couldn’t get any form of contact with Wells or anyone on his team. Sure, they had weapons at their arsenal, but they didn’t know exactly where the cult was. They didn’t know how to get to wherever the news station may have been located, and they didn’t want to risk being shot trying to ask one of the residents. The entire situation seemed utterly hopeless now, and it didn’t look as if it would get better any time soon.

“How do you think this happened?” Jon asked, not averting his bloodshot eyes from the screen.

“I dunno,” Kunzler said. “Bastards must have stayed in the sewers while the search took place.”

“What do you think we should do? Should we go and try to save them?”

“That might not do any good,” Kunzler responded. “They all might be dead by the time we find 'em.”

Wells and his team were all restlessly running for their cruisers. They had come to the conclusion that they had to get back to Grovesford as fast as they could. As they were running, they could hear coyotes howling back at the ruins, in the distance. All of them felt as if they were already out of time, but that wasn't going to stop them from getting back from Grovesford. As far as they were concerned, late was better than never.

“Alright gentlemen, this is the one time where weof all people get to break the law!” Wells yelled as they reached the idling police cruisers.

The me entered the cruisers, and some of them sped off without fastening their seat belts or closing their doors. As Wells entered his cruiser and shut the door, he noticed a small photograph of his wife sitting on the black dashboard.

“I promise to protect you two, no matter what,” he whispered.

Unfortunately for an oblivious Wells, his wife had already been murdered, and his young daughter was now one of three victims held hostage by the unstable cult. Wells started the engine of his cruiser. He then took a deep breath as he tightly gripped the steering wheel. Then, summing up a small bit of courage, Wells sped on towards Grovesford, not knowing that he was already too late. He wouldn't live to see the sunrise.

Jon and Kunzler managed to find one of the homes that the cult had broken into, and they were disgusted to see the absolute chaos that was left behind. As they slowly walked up the driveway of the victimized home, they noticed the body of a man wearing round glasses lying lifelessly in the front yard. From their vantage point, they couldn't tell exactly how the cult had killed him, but they didn't want to get close enough to the corpse to find out. Cautiously, the two of them walked onto the front porch. The white front door of the small, yellow house was left slightly ajar, and from within, golden light streamed out into the night. Jon, making sure that Kunzler was still behind him, slowly pushed the door completely open.

The first thing that the two men noticed was the staggering amount of blood that had been smeared and splattered all over the walls of the living room. It was almost everywhere. The scene reminded them of a child dipping a large paintbrush into a can of crimson colored paint, and flinging it all over a fresh white canvas. The television had also been left on, but neither Jon or Kunzler paid any attention to it. They were two busy staring in horror at the body of a woman, split completely clean in half down the middle, eerily sitting in an armchair in the corner of the room.

Jon and Kunzler proceeded to walk gingerly into the sickening murder scene. They continued to stare around at some of what they saw, and even though they'd been witness to murders before, this was a bit much to stomach. Looking at the split in half body of that woman brought a sickening feeling to both of their stomachs. All of her guts had spilled uncontrollably in between the two halves of her body and just sat

there in a heaping, steaming pile. The stench was atrocious. The entire living room smelled strongly of all kinds of death.

Jon began to notice the flickering bluish light on the blood stained walls emanating from the television screen, and turned around to view it.

The cult had vanished from the broadcast.

What now displayed on the screen was a simple message that continued to change colors that read: Come And Find Us. Just below the message was a small countdown timer..... there were only thirty minutes left.

“God..... they're gonna hurt those kids,” Jon whispered under his breath as he stared in horror at the mockingly charming, color changing message.

Kunzler turned away from the television and stepped out onto the front porch, believing he was hearing mumbling from outside. “Holy hell,” he said, noting what he saw.

Jon turned towards the open front door. “What is it? You see the cult?” he asked, curiously walking out into the night to stand next to Kunzler.

It wasn't the cult that the two men were looking at. It was just about every single citizen of Grovesford, collectively distraught, marching out of their homes as a massive group, going out to search for the cult. Some of them wielded pitch forks, and others held loaded shotguns. There were women, children, large, burly men, and everything in between. There were hundreds..... perhaps even nearly a thousand of them.

“Looks to me like they got the right idea,” Kunzler said, staring on as the Grovesford residents marched on.

“Damn right,” Jon remarked. “You think we should follow them?”

“We'd be stupid not to,” Kunzler said.

The two men then walked off of the front porch and casually made themselves apart of the weary brigade. No one really knew where the cult was exactly, but most everyone had the same idea of where the cult may have been.

“The cathedral!!” Jon heard someone yell from further on in the group.

It seemed that that would be the only feasible place for the cult to go. That was perhaps the only place in Grovesford where everyone in the town would be able to gather. Suddenly, the entire situation seemed very, very strange.

“This is a trap or something,” Jon whispered to Kunzler.

“Why?”

“They're getting everyone in this town in the same place at the same time. Somethings not right about that.”

Kunzler shrugged. “And? They're outnumbered.” Kunzler looked around at all of the people marching onward. “By a lot.”

Still, Jon wasn't at ease. He figured that this was all a huge mistake on the part of Grovesford. In fact, he simply knew that something was going to go wrong. Yet, the more he thought about it, he figured that even if most of the people currently surrounding him were killed, he'd still have a chance at saving Jacob at least. And that, as it was, was all he really ever wanted.

There were only a few more blocks to the cathedral, and immediately, bad memories were summoned within the minds of both Jon and Kunzler. They recalled when they had first come to the cathedral. They'd been forced to run around in the dark trying to kill the cult, and it failed miserably. They did manage to kill a group of hooded individuals, but they weren't a cult. Now, as they neared the large, foreboding Gothic building once again, they could only imagine what sort of horrors would unfold this time around.

With a blink of an eye, their sadistic imaginations became a twisted reality. As Grovesford as a whole came into view of the massive cathedral, random shrieks and screams of terror erupted from the afflicted crowd. What they were horrified at would remain burned into the cores of their imaginations, perhaps forever. At the very top of the cathedral, way up high on the roof of the tallest stone tower, the cult eerily stood side by side as a ghostly pale moonlight cast over them..... and their three terrified hostages, all wearing nooses around their little necks.

XVII.

The Grovesford Nightmare Somewhere along a darkened road, a small squirrel began scurrying about in search of food. It was startled, however, when the loud rumbling of a caravan of police cruisers rushed by, forcing the little creature to run for its life. The team of cops had finally made the long trip back to Grovesford after sensing that something had gone amok. However, as they all sped down roads that nestled rows of homes on either side, they didn't see anything wrong. In fact, all seemed ever so peaceful.

“Alright,” Wells bellowed into a walkie-talkie. “Everyone pull over.”

Almost all at once, the cops halted their cruisers and pulled over on the side of the street. All of their cars were now sloppily lined up down a long residential street as Wells exited his cruiser and began madly looking around the area for any signs of chaos. However, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, to him, everything seemed a bit too calm.

“Sir?” called one of the deputies as he and the rest of his comrades exited their cruisers. “Why did we stop?”

“Because,” Wells said, still intensely examining the environment. “Something isn’t right.”

For a while, no one said a word, and the silence that followed was indeed deafening.

“This is what we're gonna do now,” Wells said, turning to face his team. “We're gonna disperse. Split into twos or threes. We've gotta check each and every one of these houses to make sure everyone is..... still alive.”

One of the deputies protested the sudden idea. “Allof the houses? That could take hours.”

“Not if you stop complaining,” Wells said as he casually pulled a handgun from its holster and checked to see if it was loaded.

“Why don’t we just go back to the station?” another deputy asked.

“Like I said,” Wells snapped. “Something just doesn’t feel right.”

“When does it ever feel right in this town,” the deputy responded. “And are you sure splitting up is the best idea? You said yourself that we could be killed, right?”

Wells began walking away and signaled for a deputy to follow him into one of the houses. “I don’t think it'll matter,” he mumbled. “Disperse.”

Slowly, the entire team began to split into pairs and investigate the quiet neighborhoods of Grovesford. Wells and the deputy he'd brought along crept up the driveway of a home with their guns out and ready to fire. There were no lights on inside the eerily dark abode as far as either of them could tell.

“Go around the back,” Wells whispered to the deputy. “I'll check the front. If anything moves, shoot it.”

The deputy did as he was told and gingerly made his way around to the back of the home. Just as he'd expected, the backyard area was even darker and colder than the front had been, and even though it was currently the dead of night, large, looming trees managed to cast vividly thick shadows all over the place. The shadows were so dark, in fact, it looked as if you could fall into them.

As the deputy began slowly maneuvering around the dark backyard area, he caught something terrifying out of the corner of his eye. Hanging from a slightly creaking metal swing set were the dark bodies of three large dogs. The deputy slowly neared the animals, and noticed that they'd had their necks twisted and snapped. Their black, beady eyes looked on lifelessly into the everlasting dark as their tongues hung weakly out of their mouths. As the deputy could only stare on in horror, one of the ropes tied to the leg of one of the dogs suddenly unfastened itself and caused the large body of the animal to swiftly crash to the ground in a lifeless heap, startling the deputy and causing him to fire off a few bullets.

“Jesus!” he exclaimed.

After discovering that it was merely the dog, the deputy casually tucked his handgun back into its holster and went on to find the backdoor to the quiet home. It didn't take him long, as whoever lived in the home had left the backdoor wide open.

“Hello?” the deputy called out into the vast darkness.

Suddenly, a bright light shone through the dark home, and the deputy realized that Wells was already inside.

“It's alright,” Wells said as he located a light switch and flicked it to 'on'. “The place is deserted. Everyone's gone off somewhere.”

The deputy stepped inside. He looked around now that the ceiling light had allowed him to see, and noticed they were standing in a very elegantly decorated dining room with a medium sized kitchen near by.

“You think all the homes are like this? Neighborhoods seemed awfully quiet.”

“I don't know,” Wells said as he

cautiously looked around at what the light allowed. “But this is insane.”

“Tell me about it,” the deputy responded.

As the night slowly drew on, the pairs of policemen cautiously and carefully searched every corner of every home in the residential Grovesford area. It wasn't a daunting task, but a downright frightening one. All of the men were very much afraid, even though they were all quite heavily armed with all sorts of guns and vests. Nevertheless, they searched on in fear and curiosity, not knowing if there would be something sinister waiting around a corner to maul them to death. In Grovesford, there was no set pattern on when things would go horribly wrong. They just happened, and when they did, someone ended up dying almost always. It was tragic, yet, expected. It was this very reason that the cops made sure that their weapons were always primed to fire at even the slightest movement.

As the night skies bellowed with thunderous rage, the disturbed citizens of Grovesford stared in terror and anger at the homicidal stunt that was set to unfold before them. The cult still had the three young girls up at the top of the cathedral, and everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened. There was an absolutely sickening feeling sifting throughout the night atmosphere, a feeling that ensured everyone of the horrors of Grovesford. As the night drew on, some of the citizens attempted to enter the looming cathedral through the massive front doors, but it was useless as the doors had been sealed shut somehow. No one in their right mind dared to try and climb the building. Soon enough, everyone eventually began rioting. The citizens began yelling insults and curses at the cult. They began throwing all sorts of objects from rocks, to shoes, to lit torches that exploded on impact with the cathedral's grey walls.

“How much time do you think we have left?” Jon asked Kunzler, having to yell over the loud rioting of the mad crowd.

“I dunno. When we left, the television said we had thirty minutes to find 'em. I don't think it's been thirty minutes yet,” Kunzler yelled back.

“What the hell do you think they're waiting for? There's nothing we can do!”

“I dunno..... but I think one of those girls up there is Robert Wells' daughter. I believe they want him to watch her die,” Kunzler said, staring grimly at the terrified faces of the hostages.

Wells began to grow incredibly anxious. Thus far, none of the policemen had been able to find anything, but he was very positive that something was wrong somewhere. Besides, why else would all of the homes throughout the Grovesford neighborhoods be completely empty?

“I think we've searched every house now,” said Wells' partner as they walked up a dark street.

“No,” Wells said. “There's still one more to check.”

“Who's?”

“Mine,” Wells said.

The two men eventually came up to a standard sized home. Its porch had been heavily decorated with fake flowers and such knickknacks and there were three empty bird cages laying in the front yard.

“My God,” Wells mumbled as he ran up to the front porch with his gun drawn.

Like many of the other homes, the front door was left open, however, this one looked as if it had been broken into.

“Beth!!?” Wells called out his wife's name into the dark abode, hoping that she was alright. “Beth, are you home?!!”

Nothing.

Wells then entered the home, his home, using a flashlight to try and break the surreal darkness. The deputy slowly followed behind him.

“Beth?!!” Wells called out again.

No response.

At this point, Wells was very sure that his wife, and perhaps his daughter, had been killed. He began to lose hope, and was now merely being driven forward by the small chance that at least one of them would be here, alive. Yet, he knew better. None of the other homes had anyone in them. Had the cult murdered them all? He asked himself.

Wells and the deputy slowly crept forward through the aphotic blackness. Besides small patches of silvery moonlight here and there, neither of them could really see where they were going, but Wells had at least had a clue since he lived there.

“We're nearing the kitchen,” Wells told the deputy.

He the slowly reached out at a wall and felt around for a light switch. He flicked the kitchen light on.

And there she was.

Dead.

Murdered.

Slaughtered.

Wells dropped his gun and the flashlight he'd been using. He opened his mouth to respond to what he was seeing, but words never escaped his lips. Only silence. It looked as if Wells' wife, Beth, had been literally ripped in half. She was strewn onto the wooden kitchen table, her torso hanging off over one end, her legs hanging over the other. There was a massive puddle of thick blood dripping from in between the two pieces of Beth's carcass, causing another, smaller puddle to form on the white tile kitchen floor.

Drip...

.... drip.....

..... drip.....

“Sir?” the deputy attempted to get Wells' attention, but the man, clearly in shock, wasn't hearing him.

“Sir? What should we do?”

“We....,” Wells said. “We've got to find my daughter.”

Wells then slowly turned away from his wife's body and left the home, followed by the deputy.

As bad as things had been in Grovesford to date, they had yet to see the worst. However, that time had finally come. The crowd gathered out in front of the cathedral continued to relentlessly yell threats and throw objects (although all of them missed) at the cult. They were trying to do everything they could to prevent the three little girls from being hung, but everyone shared the same distraught feeling. It was inevitable, and all of their protests were for naught.

Suddenly, loud, screaming sirens could be heard in the close distance.

“It's the cops!!” yelled someone from within the mob.

A barrage of police cruisers quickly came to violently screeching halts near the crowd of residents.. Immediately, all of the cops driving the vehicles stormed out and ran for the cathedral, their weapons pointed directly at the cult.

Wells burst out of his cruiser and immediately noticed that his young daughter was among the three hostages.

“Wait!!!” he yelled, as he followed his comrades. “Don't shoot!!!!”

“Sir, the cult-”

“DON'T SHOOT!!!!”

“What are you waiting for? Shoot 'em!!!” someone yelled from the large crowd.

“STOP!!!” Wells yelled. “DON'T SHOOT!!!”

And then it happened. All at once, it no longer mattered whether anyone fired a gun in the direction of the cult or not. It no longer mattered whether anyone wanted to shoot, or not. It no longer mattered. All at once,

everything to move in slow motion. There was a sudden silence as all of Grovesford watched to see what the cult's next move would be. And then it happened.

Wells could see a sickening smile form across the mouth of one of the cultists.... right before he and his brethren violently shoved the three girls off the top of the cathedral with the nooses still tied around their necks. Sound seemed to be drained from the weary night atmosphere as the victimized children plummeted to their deaths. Some of the women in the crowd of Grovesford residents fainted, some of them screamed, some turned away, some simply stared on in horror. The other little kids in the crowd buried their faces in their parent's clothing in an attempt to hide themselves from the terror.

The three bodies of the little girls spiraled down the side of the Gothic building as they screamed for their lives, eerily silent screams of pure fear. Their bodies continued to fall, and fall, and fall until the ropes tied to their necks had reached their maximum lengths. When that happened, everyone in Grovesford died a little inside. Within mere moments, the girls, all three of them, were dead. Grovesford stared on in deafening silence as the three lifeless bodies of the little girls simply hung, gently swinging side to side, one lightly brushing against another, as it slowly began to rain.

XVIII.

The Second Plague Slowly, but steadily, the surreality of the situation began to set in, and Grovesford as a whole became an entirely different place altogether. Never before had the town fell witness to such an atrocious murder. The cold, everlasting memory of the lynching would never be forgotten by a soul throughout the entire town. It was a truly vague moment of pure horror, a horror that seemed intent on growing, and expanding until it overtook all dreams and transformed them into nightmares. And yet, it was only getting started.

Robert Wells, now a broken man, dropped to his knees as the rain began to pour down in Grovesford, Alabama. He would never be the same person again. In fact, deep down, he saw no reason to continue living. It was fruitless. His wife had been murdered behind his back, and his daughter had been hung before his very eyes. Nothing, as far as he could conceive, could be worse. Nothing.

Sound began to slowly drift back into the town as loud screams of despair and fear emanated from the distraught crowd of emotionally devastated Grovesford citizens.

People began weeping and screaming, but what was done was done.

“We need ladders!!!!” yelled one of the deputies as he ran towards the cathedral. “Call the fire department!!!!”

Wells remained on his knees on the muddy ground as his blonde hair became matted down with the everlasting rain. What was he to do now? He no longer felt the need to try and stop the cult. He no longer felt the need to try and continue on living. He no longer felt the need to do too much of anything from this point. Wells looked down at his hands as an infinite amount of small rain droplets splashed into his palms. He then balled his hands into fists and looked up at his murdered daughter still hanging with the noose constricting her already mangled neck.

“Officer Wells!” one of the deputy called. “We need your help!!!”

To hell with them, Wells thought to himself. He wasn’t going to help anyone else but himself now. And there was only one way that he knew how to do that.

“Officer Wells??!?”

The rain had begun to pour down even more now as Grovesford slowly went into a wild frenzy. Amidst the chaos, Wells slowly pulled a handgun from its holster.

“Everybody calm down!! We can handle this!!! Calm down!!!” yelled a deputy as three large firetrucks pulled up nearby with long ladders.

Wells cocked his handgun while watching the madness unfold before him. There were women grabbing on to some of the deputies, there were children running around in circles crying with their hands planted over their ears. There was rain everywhere, and death was incredibly prominent throughout the atmosphere. Yet, the most notable thing about the wild scene that stood out to Wells the most was that the eight cultist still loomed atop the cathedral, and all of them were looking directly at him, smiling sickly.

“Please, just calm down!!” the deputies were saying in an attempt to restore order to the messy situation. “We’re getting the ladders now!! Hurry up with those ladders!!”

Wells watched on as a handful of firemen in yellow suits rushed over to the crime scene with three long ladders hauled over their shoulders. He then returned his attention to the cult as they continued to stare down at him, as if they were waiting for something to happen.

Bastards, Wells thought. You took my family. But you won't take me. Wells pointed the loaded handgun towards his head. He planted the end of the barrel against his exposed temple. Then, he fired.

The chaos throughout the crowd of residents failed to cease, and no one seemed to notice, or care, that Wells had killed himself. It was if suicide fit in perfectly with the madness that now took place, which was a disturbing thought.

Kunzler and Jon watched on as Wells shot himself among the outplaying of chaos before them. They didn't even make an attempt to try and stop him. The both of them figured that it was for his, and Grovesford's, own good. Besides, they knew very well that there were more serious matters that needed to be attended to.

"We gotta get up there," Jon told Kunzler as he stared up at the top of the cathedral.

Jon attempted to run for the large building, but Kunzler held him back. "Hold it," he said as he watched the firemen and policemen position the long ladders against the side of the cathedral. "Let's see what happens to them first."

"We gotta tie those bodies down," stated one of the deputies.

"What about the cult?" another asked.

"Worry about that after we get the bodies down, now come on!!"

Jon and Kunzler, and a few citizens that had managed to keep their sanity intact, watched intently as two cops and a policeman climbed the three metal ladders toward the bodies of the lynched girls. The fireman, who'd opted to climb the ladder to the far left, slipped, and nearly fell to his death as he reached the tenth rung.

"Oh..... shit!!!" he cursed as he held on.

"You alright over there?" one of the policemen asked him.

"Yeah. Probably not the smartest thing, you know, doing this in the rain."

"We don't have a choice. We cant just leave the bodies up there."

They resumed climbing, each man making sure to be very careful on the wet ladders. Thunder bellowed across the dark, murky Grovesford skies as the three men slowly neared the bodies of the dead girls. Down below, there was still a moderate amount of sheer chaos, and Jon and Kunzler had to continuously separate themselves from the madness of the crowd as they watched the policemen and the fireman begin to untie the nooses from the victims' necks.

Suddenly, all the way from hell, cannibals burst out from the cathedral windows and viciously attacked the two policemen, and the unknowing fireman.

"Holy hell!!!" Kunzler yelled in shock as he watched even more unmitigated madness unfold.

The cannibals continued to attack the men until they were slaughtered. They tossed their bodies off of the ladders like rag dolls, and leaped down finish them off, all in one, sick, swift motion. The other cops

immediately began madly firing at the cannibals, killing them. However, that mere attack was nothing compared to what would yet happen, as hundreds of more cannibals burst from the windows all around the Gothic cathedral.

“Kill them!!! Kill all of them!!!” yelled one of the deputies as he and his remain comrades scaled the ladders while simultaneously firing at the inflicted monsters.

If Groveford had been chaotic before, it was downright hysterical now. The policemen made valiant efforts in trying to stop the cannibals before anymore drastic murders occurred, but they were terribly outnumbered. The sick cannibals scaled the walls of the cathedral like mad demons, destroying the policemen and ripping chunks of their flesh from their bodies. The citizens below had broken out into an absolute frenzy. All at once, order ceased to exist, and Groveford as a whole were on it's knees, at the mercy of madness.

Except two. Jon and Kunzler carefully

made sure to not encounter any cannibals. They attempted to ensure that there were no surprise attacks against them, but the both of them knew that that couldn't be guaranteed.

“What the hell do we do?!!!” Kunzler yelled over all the shooting, screaming, and panicking.

“We need to get inside the cathedral!!!” Jon responded.

As they looked on, there didn't seem to be any possible way for them to safely attempt to enter the cathedral without either getting seriously hurt, or brutally killed. There were bodies falling from all over the place, there were fights that erupted from seemingly at random throughout the crowd, and cannibals were lurking about. It was no mans land.

“We just gotta-” Jon began, but was blindsided by a cannibal from behind.

“Jon!!!” Kunzler yelled.

The monster immediately began to attempt to choke Jon out as they rolled around in the mud, and Jon wasn't having the best of luck stopping it. He'd be put to sleep if something wasn't done soon. Kunzler, without hesitation attacked the cannibal by attempting to break it's neck. He began twisting it's neck while yelling insult, until he heard and felt it snap.

“You alright?” he asked as he helped Jon to his feet.

“Fine,” Jon responded as he attempted to brush some of the mud from his wet clothes.

Jon and Kunzler now watched on as the battle between the policemen, firemen, and cannibals raged on. It was a shock that some of the policemen and fireman had managed to avoid being killed, but they weren't having any luck in defeating any of the cannibals, as it seemed the more they shot and killed, more of the monsters would burst from the windows of the cathedral.

"Retreat!!!" yelled one of the deputies.

"What?!?"

"I SAID RETREAT!!!! There are too many of them!!!"

All of the remaining policemen and firemen climbed down from the cathedral, clearly defeated, and clearly tired of having their own men murdered left and right.

"What do we do now?" asked one of the firemen as they watched the cannibals climb to the top of the cathedral like giant, wet bugs.

A clap of thunder and a flash of lightning brought a hectic idea to one of the policemen.

With a smile, he said, "We're gonna have to burn it down."

The firemen stared at him through the ongoing rain as they contemplated what he'd just suggested.

"It's our job to put out fires," one of them said. "Not start them."

"Do you see what the hell has happened?!?" the deputy asked through gritted teeth, pointing at the cathedral and signaling to the chaos around him. "There's nothing else we can do. The cult is up there, and those fucking cannibals are up there! We're burning that cathedral to the ground! This ends tonight!"

The firemen watched as the deputy got the attention of the Grovesford residents.

"Listen to me! We're gonna burn that cathedral to the ground, alright!! All of us!!

Although it took the mention of more chaos to get the attention of the rowdy mob, everyone, including some of the firemen, were prepared to partake in the unholy act. Using everything from lighters, to matches, to gasoline, the cops, citizens and firemen began starting fires with whatever they could in the rain.

Jon and Kunzler wearily look on as the mob of citizens begin starting fires with the policemen and the firemen.

"We gotta find a way inside," Jon says to Kunzler.

He was indeed right. If Jacob was inside the cathedral, or even on the roof with the cult and the cannibals, then he and Kunzler would have to get inside the building and rescue him before it was too late. The citizens were absolutely hellbent on burning the cathedral down and watching the cult die. They fed off of the destruction. It was madness to the highest degree, and one way or another, it would all come to head here tonight.

Jon and Kunzler began jogging towards the cathedral as the citizens and such continued to light fires. They reached the large double doors and, even though they knew the doors would be sealed, they attempted to break them open.

“Dammit,” Kunzler said. “Gotta find another way.”

They ran around to the side of the building and noticed that there were a few out of reach broken windows that the cannibals had used as their method of escape. Jon and Kunzler knew that the windows were going to have to be their method of entry if they wanted to get inside. They also knew that one mistake trying to get into the windows could lead to them dying before they even had a chance.

“Alright then,” Kunzler said. “I’ll start climbin’ first.”

There were no ladders on this side of the cathedral, and Kunzler had to use the already rain soaked stones and such to make his way towards the broken windows. He slowly took the climb foot by foot, making sure that every time he reached up, there was something to grab on to. Jon began climbing after him shortly and soon, both of them were at least five feet off of the ground, trying to make it up to one of the broken windows.

“How far?!!” Jon yelled up at Kunzler as rain splashed down into his face.

“I dunno!!” Kunzler yelled back. “Cant be too far!!”

The two men continued to climb slowly upward. At one point, Jon contemplated dropping back to the ground since the endeavor was as risky as it was, but he decided against it once he saw that they had already climbed too far. The ongoing rainfall didn’t help them at all, in fact, it made the dangerous climb even more life threatening.

“Dammit!!” Kunzler yelled as he felt for another stone to grab on to, but found none.

“What is it?” Jon asked as a loud bellowing of thunder rolled across the night skies.

“We might be stuck. I cant find nothin’ to haul myself up any further.”

“No,” Jon said. “We cant be stuck!! We don’t have a choice now!! If we fall, we die!!”

“Just calm down!!” Kunzler said. “Let's just figure this out.”

Unfortunately for them, they didn't have any time to figure anything out. Another clap of thunder rolled across the skies as Jon looked down towards the ground, hoping that he'd either be able to find a way to climb down, or see a fireman nearby. What he did see, however, was one of the cannibals, glaring back up at him, slowly licking its lips. Jon stared down in horror at the twisted man as he slowly began scaling the wall, making his way towards the both of them.

“Climb!!!” Jon yelled up to Kunzler.

“What?” Kunzler asked. “I told ya we were stuck!!”

Jon glanced back down to see how the cannibal was progressing. Due to the rain, the cannibal didn't seem to be having the best of luck, but he was indeed making his way towards potential victims.

“Kunzler,” Jon called. “We don't have a choice!! We have to climb!!!”

“Look, if we just calm down and figure this out-”

“We don't have time for that!!!!” Jon yelled.

Kunzler looked back down towards Jon and finally noticed that the cannibal was well on its way towards them.

“Shit.” he murmured.

Kunzler looked upwards for something, anything, that would help them reach the windows that beckoned them, but was finding nothing. He then, however, noticed that if they could somehow make it to the front of the building, they could use the ladders or ropes to climb the rest of the way inside.

“Start climbin' sideways!!” Kunzler yelled down at Jon as he did just that.

“What?!?” Jon asked.

“Climb sideways!!!” Kunzler yelled again.

The rain began to pour a bit harder now, but the two men found it much easier to climb to the side as opposed to upwards right into the oncoming rainfall. Kunzler's plan also bought them more time as the cannibal not only had to climb up, but he too had to climb sideways to get to Jon or Kunzler.

The three of them began climbing towards the edge of the side of the massive cathedral, with Kunzler leading them. They found that there were more stones to hold and step onto, however, neither of them knew what they'd do once they had to climb the corner to reach the front side of the building.

Jon nor Kunzler was thinking of that now, as their main priority was to get away from the cannibal foaming from the mouth below them.

Kunzler eventually managed to reach the edge in which he'd have to climb over in order to reach the front side of the cathedral. Before attempting that, he looked back and made sure Jon would be alright. Luckily, he saw that the cannibal was still a good four or five feet away from him.

“Go ahead!!” Jon yelled as he continued to valiantly climb. “Don't worry about me, I've got this!”

A flash of lightning lit the skies for all of a millisecond as Kunzler began to gingerly attempt to climb around the corner to the front of the cathedral. At first, his foot slipped as he carefully placed it onto a protruding stone. For a split second, he was sure that he was going to fall and be killed. However, he managed to maintain his place on the wall and continued climbing. Eventually he made his way around to the front wall of the old Gothic church, only to be met with another handful of dilemmas. Down below, Grovesford was still prepping to burn the building down at all costs.

“Hey, what the hell is that man doing?” one of the residents asked.

A deputy followed the man's gaze and noticed Kunzler climbing the walls. “It doesn't matter,” the deputy said. “We're burning it regardless.”

The loud bong of a massive bell from within the building began to be audible from all over Grovesford. The incredible sound sent vibrations through all of the building's stone walls, making the climb even more difficult for Jon, Kunzler, and the cannibal. Nevertheless, Kunzler continued to climb, making sure that he kept his focus. He knew that one tiny mistake could very well lead to an untimely demise. Lightning began to frequently occur at this point as it seemed the older the night grew, the more violent the rainstorm became. Yet, fortunately for Kunzler, he was only a few feet away from one of the ladders now. As he continued to climb, he noticed Jon just getting around the corner, making it safely over to the front wall.

“Try to use the ladder to reach the rope!!” Jon yelled out as he climbed on.

In response, Kunzler carefully removed one of his hands from a stone and reached out for the metal ladder. However, just as his hand was about to make contact, a vicious bolt of lightning zapped from the sky, and blasted the ladder, all in the span of a little over a second.

“Holy shit!!” Kunzler yelled as the ladder smacked against the stone wall of the cathedral before slowly falling to the ground, towards the unsuspecting crowd.

“Watch out!!” someone from within the crowd yelled, getting them all to scatter just before the ladder came in collision with any of them.

Now, Kunzler was presented with two choices. He could either try and make the rest of the climb towards the first lynching rope, or he could try and make his way over towards the next ladder, risking being struck by another bolt of lightning.

“Go for the rope!!” Jon yelled just as the cannibal made his way to the front wall of the cathedral.

Kunzler began climbing for the slightly swinging rope. He noticed that it still had the dead body of one of the hostages lynched. The sight of the dead girl, her eyes looking whichever way the rope swung, sent chills up and down Kunzler's old spine. But he kept climbing. He knew that if he were to slow down for a even a second, there would be dire consequences from a handful of threats. On the contrary, he was doing this for more than his own life. He was doing it for Jon. He was doing it for Jon's son, Jacob. He was doing it for Jon's family. He was doing it for his very own family. And he was doing it for Grovesford. Even with the risk of being burned to death, along with Jon and the large cathedral, he was doing this for Grovesford.

Kunzler eventually managed to grab a hold onto the body of the lynched girl and haul himself up towards the rope. He calmly took a deep breath, knowing that he was now safe from slipping and falling, but another thought occurred to him. What if the rope wouldn't be strong enough to support two bodies? And if since Jon was making his way towards it too, he knew it would be able to support three. He had to climb, and fast.

The storm raged on in the skies and on the ground as the rain continued to pour, and the mad mob below continued to create fires and soak the cathedral with gasoline. Kunzler had made his way halfway up the rope, only about two or three feet from a broken window now. It was then that he smelled the smoke.

“Dammit!!” Jon yelled as he continued to climb towards the rope.

Kunzler looked down and saw that the mob had finally managed to set part of the cathedral on fire. Some of the residents were throwing sticks and their shoes into the fire to make it grow as much as they could.

“We've gotta hurry!” Jon yelled. “This place is gonna be surrounded in flames!!”

Kunzler had to push the thought of burning to death out of his mind if he wanted to make it to the broken window just above. Unfortunately for him, the rain had begun to die away ever so slightly, which in turn allowed the fire below to grow even faster. Kunzler knew, due to the size of the cathedral, that it would take a good while for the entire building to be burned down completely, but he also knew that he and Jon still needed to find, and perhaps rescue Jacob before it was too late. He figured that the cult was still on the roof with some of the cannibals, but was prepared to be attacked in the chance that they were lurking about the dark caverns of the frighteningly large building.

Finally, Kunzler made it to one of the windows and hauled himself up. Just as he did so, Jon finally made his way to the rope and began climbing.

“Come on,” Kunzler said, watching Jon’s progress to ensure that nothing happened.

Suddenly, the cannibal leapt up behind Jon and attempted to grab a hold of the lynched body, however, he slipped and began falling to his fiery demise, screaming in terror. The fires below had grown a significant amount now, and were plenty enough to completely engulf the entire body of the unfortunate cannibal.

“Good riddance,” Kunzler half-heartedly muttered.

Jon finally made his way up to the window and Kunzler held out a bony hand to help him up. The two men sat perched on the stone ledge of the large window, watching the fire below grow with each passing second. Then, they looked at the faces of the residents and police officials of Grovesford. They were all abuzz, but they were no longer rowdy. They wanted the cult dead, and they didn’t care if Jon and Kunzler had scaled the walls. Now, each and every one of them was going to wait to see if the cult would burn down with the aged building, even if it took the rest of the night. They’d been through enough already, and they wanted it to end.

“Come on,” Kunzler said to Jon as he carefully made his way inside the endless darkness of the eerily silent building.

For a while, Jon continued to stare down at the many faces of the residents of Grovesford. He realized that all of these people had been through something similar to he had, and that while they didn’t want him or Kunzler in particular to die, it was all they could think of to burn the cathedral while the cult and cannibals were all still inside, or atop it. Now, as he looked at all of their faces, women and children, men, and people of all races and cultures, he knew they felt for him. Most of them more than likely knew of his story with the cult. They knew his family had been violently taken from him. They could relate, unfortunately, which was why they had to burn the cathedral and see that the cult burned with it.

After sighing, Jon finally decided that he ought to get inside and hunt for his son before it was too late. He knew that he may very well not come out of the cathedral alive, if at all, but this was the chance he’d been waiting for. If he never saw Jacob again, life wouldn’t be worth living anyway. Jon placed one foot inside the large broken window, preparing to climb out of the cathedral. However, just as he did so, he noticed a young boy, perhaps five or six years old, wave to him, as if saying goodbye. The gesture was kind, yet, it caused Jon to ponder the situation. Here he was, about to dive into another potential trap.

Jacob, he thought.

Then, with one final glance at the faces of the Grovesford residents and the rest of the visible outside world, Jon made the plunge into the sea of darkness.

XIX.

Ashes Silence. The deafening scream of silence. Ever so elusive it was, causing many to question whether it even existed or not. A subtle weapon of simple proportions. A manipulative entity. Silence, as it stands, was nothing more than one loud scream in disguise.

“I can't really tell how far up we are,” Jon said, looking down into the black, dusty gloom of the cathedral's cave like interior. “We'll just have to climb down until we touch ground.”

Jon began to find a spot to climb down from, but Kunzler stopped him. “Hold it,” he said. “Listen...”

Jon listened, but heard nothing. There was only the illusion of silence. “What am I supposed to be hearing?” Jon asked.

“Nothing,” Kunzler told him. “But let this be a warning. Even if we can't hear them..... even if we can't see them..... they're in here.”

The thought of being oblivious to the dark camouflage that the cult had, time and time again, used against them was chilling. It was mostly dark within the cathedral, yet, there were thick streams of moonlight flowing in from the various broken windows that allowed a very minimal amount of light.

“Right,” Jon said, taking a deep breath. “I'll climb down first.”

He began to climb down from the broken window area, making sure to remain as close to the stone wall as possible. Surprisingly, it wasn't nearly as difficult to climb down from inside as it was to climb up from outside. That, perhaps, was due to the fact that the stones outside had been soaked in rain. Nevertheless, Jon eventually managed to make it all the way to the floor of the cathedral.

“Alright,” he called up to Kunzler who was still perched at the window. “Come on down.”

Jon waited as Kunzler made his way to the floor while looking around at what the moonlight allowed. He didn't know what part of the cathedral they were in, but he knew that somehow they needed to get to the roof. He figured that there had to be a set of stairs somewhere.

“Easier than I figured,” Kunzler said as he reached the floor.

As the two men looked around the Gothic building, trying to figure out where they were and where they should go, a brisk, cold draft rolled by and stung their skins. Jon and Kunzler exchanged worried looks as this happened.

“Mind games,” Kunzler said. “Don't let it get to ya.”

Then, they began walking forward, slowly, making sure their arms were slightly outstretched so they would be able to feel if anything was in front of them. Kunzler was ahead of Jon, but they both felt equally lost. It was dark, cold, hauntingly silent. There seemed to be a slight echo emanating from the walls, but neither man could depict whether it was just the silence playing trick on their ears, or if something was indeed stirring among the dark.

After slowly moving forward for about six feet, Kunzler's hands came into contact with something..... something that felt like a chair.

“This must be where the altar is,” Kunzler said. “I can see the rows of seats now.”

Both men slowly examined the large room, their eyes scanning over the seemingly endless rows of seats leading to the altar. Suddenly, the both of them noticed a small pair of red eyes peeking over one of the rows. As they spotted it, however, it vanished.

“Did ya see it?” Kunzler quietly asked.

Suddenly, the huge room was filled with the muffled laughter of a baby.

“Jacob...” Jon said, looking around.

“Don't fall for it...” Kunzler said.

But Jon wasn't listening. He began walking up and down the rows of seats, attempting to examine every inch of them. Little did he know, however, that he was being followed. And not by Kunzler.

“Jacob!!” Jon called.

“Keep your voice down,” Kunzler hissed. “And where the hell are ya!!?”

The immense darkness forced the two to once again be separated.

“Jon!!?” Kunzler whispered.

Jon had managed to walk up and down all of the rows of seats and had found himself near the stairs leading up to the attic. Sometime during that, he realized that he had wandered away from Kunzler again, but as he discovered that he'd successfully found the stairs, he didn't feel as endangered as he should have.

Without hesitation, Jon began slowly ascending the stairs that led to the attic. Every step he made was met with a loud, distinguished creaking sound. He realized it was an old church, but he dearly hoped that he wouldn't draw the attention of the cult or the cannibals..... wherever they were

Kunzler had still been looking for Jon around the altar. He knew that one, if not both of them would be killed if they remained split up.

“Jon!!” he whispered.

He then heard the creaking of the stairs, but didn't know which way it was coming from.

“Jon!!”

He began to hear a sudden slight whispering. It didn't sound like an illusion. In fact, it sounded like there was someone else near the altar with him.

“Jon?” he called, but there was no reply.

The whispering continued as Kunzler continued to look for Jon, but he eventually realized that he wouldn't be able to find him in the dark. He'd have to just hope Jon was alright and try and find the stairs. He now moved slowly, but carefully, making sure that he remained aware of his dark surroundings. The last thing he needed was....

As he turned his head to observe the environment, he noticed a dark figure standing in the corner of the altar, not moving, watching him.

“Jon?” he called. “Is that you?”

Suddenly, the figure madly charged forwards, leaping like some rabid creature over the rows of seats in the altar. At the last moment, Kunzler realized that it was one of the cannibals.

“Shit!” he spat as he blindly ran away from it.

As he tried to escape, he could hear the cannibals heavy, raspy breathing as it leapt over the seats and seethed with hunger. Kunzler couldn't see where he was going, but it didn't matter to him. All he wanted was to get away from the cannibal, even if it meant running into a worse threat. Fortunately for him, however, he managed to find the stairs, and noticed that Jon was already halfway up them.

“Jon!!” Kunzler yelled.

Jon stopped ascending and turned to spot Kunzler.

As Kunzler began running up the stairs, Jon walked to meet him

“What is it?” Jon asked. “Did you see something?”

“The cannibals,” Kunzler breathed. “They're...”

From higher up the stairs, a dark figure suddenly and violently collided into Jon, sending the both of them crashing down the stairs. Kunzler managed evade impact with them as they went, pinning himself against the stone wall.

“Aaaarrgghh!!” Jon yelled as he and his assailant suffered a painful landing at the bottom.

Jon attempted to get to his feet, but was attacked once more, his assaulter attempting to tackle him back to the ground. Jon eventually realized that he was being attacked by one of the cannibals. The man's strong breath blasted into Jon's face as he struggled to gain the upper hand in the blindside. Jon eventually noticed long shards of broken glass scattered about the floor from when the cannibals had busted out of the cathedral windows. He quickly grabbed one of them, cutting his palm in the process, and plunged the makeshift weapon deep into his attacker's face. The shard was sent through the man's cheek and protruded out of his other cheek. The cannibal attempted to scream in pain and agony, but that simply made the wound worse. He eventually let go of Jon and went to his knees. Jon, however, wasn't finished with him. He yanked the long sharp shard from the man's face and stabbed him again, this time in the chest.

“You son of a bitch!!!” Jon yelled as he repeatedly brought the shard in and out of the man's body.

At some point during Jon's attack, the man had died, but that didn't stop Jon from stabbing the hell out of him. He continued to stab and stab, possessed with blind fury, and a bundle of other vastly enticing emotions, all of which were tied directly to his kidnapped son and his murdered family members. He was a distraught man, definitely not the same man that had entered Grovesford. The town had changed him. The cult had changed him. For better or for worse, he was different now. But all the same, he somewhat enjoyed being different. The new Jon wouldn't have a problem killing all of the cannibals, and every member of the cult.

Eventually, Jon stopped slashing the already mangled body of the cannibal. Droplets of blood has splattered on his face and clothes, but he didn't care. He figured that this was only one of many people he'd be killing tonight. Jon looked at the shard of glass he wielded, and was surprised to find that it had snapped during his tirade. He was also surprised to find that the part he'd been holding had sunk deeper into his bare palm. Although he didn't feel the wound right now, he knew that if he lived through the night, the impending pain would make it self ever so clear.

Breathing heavily, Jon tossed the now useless shard away and grabbed another one. He then turned to Kunzler.

“You're not gonna use that thing on me are ya?” Kunzler asked sarcastically.

Jon chuckled. “No. But I suggest you grab one too. We'll probably be needing them again shortly.”

“You're right,” Kunzler said as he

went to pick out the longest, sharpest shard of glass he could find. “Who knows how many of those things are running around us.”

After Kunzler had chosen a weapon, the two of them once again began making the ascent into the gloom above. The both of them had the same feeling that the cult was waiting for them somewhere up there. It was always how things played out. They'd get lured into some kind of trap and nearly get killed. But unlike before, they wanted to be brought into the trap this time. Unlike before, they were ready for whatever was going to happen. Even though the building was well on its way to being burned to the ground, even though they knew that there was an incredibly small chance of surviving what would soon come, and even though they carried on through the dark, Gothic church knowing very well that they were pitilessly outnumbered, they were ready. And if what Jon had done to the cannibal just moments ago was any indication, they'd either kill the entire cult tonight, or get killed trying to do so. They were ready to kill. And they were ready to die.

The laughing, the same laughing that they'd heard in the sewers, and the same laughing that had haunted them earlier, gripped the atmosphere now once again as they slowly held their makeshift weapons in front of them and continued the long, dark,

threatening ascent.

“You hear it?” Jon asked.

“I hear it,” Kunzler responded.

The laughing still sounded slightly muffled, as if it weren't directly anywhere near them, but close or loud enough to where they'd be able to make out what it was. The both of them figured that this was some kind of sick mind game, as the cult had done so too many times in the past. They weren't going to fall for it either, but little did they know that they didn't have much of a choice. This wasn't their battle to win. In fact, one would be right to believe that they were destined for defeat from the get go (both their families had been murdered). They had, granted bravely, entered enemy territory without any further speculation as to why the cult had chosen the cathedral in the first place, but it was far too late now. Based off of countless past events, there didn't seem to be any likely middle ground on any of this. There would be death tonight, whether it was Jon and Kunzler, or whether it was the cult..... or even Jacob.

They finally reached the attic, and like much of the rest of the cathedral, it was dark, minus a few patches of moonlight here and there. Jon began to grow slightly nervous as sweat began to cover his face. He still gripped the glass shard tightly as he attempted to calmly examine the attic, but he couldn't help but wonder how they got this far. Surely if the cult truly wanted them dead, they could have jumped them downstairs in the dark and disappeared forever. No one would know since the building was already on fire anyway, and it'd be nothing but ashes and dust before morning.

Then, praying that his eyes weren't playing dirty tricks on him, Jon believed that he spotted the entire cult, darkly standing in a group in the corner of the empty attic.

“There they are,” he whispered to Kunzler, pointing his glass shard. “In the corner.”

Jon’s breathing was loud enough to wake the dead yet, the “cult” didn’t seem to hear him.

“The what are we waitin’ for?” Kunzler asked, prepping his shard to slash and stab.

The two men then slowly edged forward side by side, holding their shards out in front of them. Their footsteps caused creaks from the old wood of the attic floor, but once again, they were ignored by what they believed was the cult.

“You bastards deaf or somethin’, huh!?!” Kunzler called. No response.

“Alright you motherfuckers,” he said.

Kunzler then ran forward and plunged his shard into one of the “cultists” bodies, yelling madly in the process. As he did so, his shard snapped and stung his palm, just like Jon’s had done. As it turned out, whatever he was stabbing at wasn’t even a person, let alone the cult.

“God dammit!!” Kunzler spat as he abruptly dropped his weapon and examined his wounded palm.

Kunzler then grabbed the black cloak of whatever it was he had just attempted to stab, and yanked it, removing it from the supposed “cultist”.

“It’s a fuckin’ manikin,” he said in disgust. “All of ‘em are manikins.”

Jon didn’t let his guard down, even with knowing that the manikins had been another sick trick. He still had an itching feeling that the cult was indeed nearby. He could still barely hear the soft laughing of an entertained infant. His boy. Jacob.

“The roof,” Jon whispered to Kunzler. “They’re on the roof.”

Kunzler still held onto the cloak that had covered the manikin he’d attacked. “Let’s get up there,” he said. The two men walked to one end of the aphotic attic in search of a way onto the roof above.

“Right here,” Jon said, pointing his

glass shard at a wooden door. “This is the way.”

Suddenly, the strong smell of smoke from the fires that were inexplicably lit outside the cathedral began to fill the noses of both Jon and Kunzler. There were two forms of death awaiting them now, the roaring flames that gradually ate the large Gothic building and the cult and cannibals on the roof, but neither men

showed the slightest bit of fear. It was no question that it was their duty to follow through with what had begun many long months ago. They had made it this far, alive, and were not going to allow the fear of dying tarnish their hopes any longer. Now, dying didn't seem to be the worse part of it for them. Jacob was up there, helpless, trapped within the cold, bony arms of some sinister cultist. Live or die, they knew that they had to somehow get Jacob free from them.

“Ok,” Jon said, taking a deep breath and flipping his shard weapon repeatedly in his right hand. “I'll go up first. You follow close behind me. If anything happens, attack them, and don't stop until either we're dead, or they're dead.”

Half of Kunzler's weathered face was hidden by some of the dark shadows that cloaked certain parts of the attic. Jon could still tell that the man had nodded in approval of his bold statement, but he nonetheless had a feeling deep within his gut. He was used to life or death situations, yet, he wasn't ready to lose another friend. And he knew very well that tonight could be the final time he and Kunzler see each other alive, or at all. Jon finally pushed the door leading out onto the roof of the cathedral upward, opening it so that they could haul themselves to whatever doom or glory that lay ahead. He then reached up, grabbed the edges of the skyward doorway and pulled himself up onto the roof, followed by Kunzler.

And they were.

The cannibals.

The cult.

And Jacob.

The smoke from the rising fire now filled much of the atmosphere surrounding the Grovesford cathedral, causing a wave of heat and a light blanket of ash to sift about. As the raring flames climbed their way towards the congregation of bodies on the roof, a sudden stare down ensued. Jon and Kunzler, who stood side by side with their shards of sharp glass primed, eyed every single person that stood only ten or so feet before them. One of the cultists held Jacob in his arms... like he was one of them instead of a normal child. The cannibals stood clear of the cult, but it was obvious that they were very, very hungry.

Jon then spoke. “I want my son,” he declared.

No one else said a word, but the slight flickering of the impending flames and the slight murmurs coming from the crowd below were presently audible. Now, Jon and the cultist holding his son looked each other down. Something about the way half of the thing's face was hidden by the shadows of its black hood was troubling to Jon. Its red eyes pierced through Jon's soul, and it bothered him. Then, the cultist slowly smiled.

Jon lurched forward, having had enough of the games, and attacked. He ran forward and swung the shard of glass, but when it finally sunk into something, he was surprised to find that it was a cannibal instead of one of the cultists. Regardless, Jon continued to violently destroy whatever was standing in front of him. Kunzler did the same, slashing away at the remaining cannibals, killing most of the ones he connect with. There was a sick form of enjoyment shared by both Jon and Kunzler from doing what they were doing. It was an almost relieving feeling to be able to kill something instead of watching something get killed.

Suddenly, however, the numbers of the cannibals began to become overwhelming. Both Jon and Kunzler were being attacked by two cannibals at once, and their shards had either broken, or remained stuck within the flesh of one of the dead cannibals. The cult had apparently opted to stand by and see if Jon or Kunzler managed to live through the cannibals attacks. They stood eerily side by side, watching the sudden scuffle like scavengers seeking the remains of the fallen prey of some menacing predator.

Kunzler managed to badly cripple one of his attackers with a vicious elbow to its nose, sending it falling to the ground with thin streams of blood flying from it's crushed nostrils. The other cannibal that had been attacking him suddenly backed away slowly, not wanting to suffer the same fate.

“What?” Kunzler asked the retreating cannibal while wiping blood from his own nose. “You're not scared now, are ya?”

The cannibal then began chuckling to himself. “You sound brave for a man that's moments away from burning to death,” it said.

Kunzler then lunged himself at the cannibal, attempting to tackle it to the ground, but the effort was fruitless as the cannibals superior strength began to prove to be a deciding factor. The cannibal shoved Kunzler away from him and lurched at the old man while his guard was down. At the last minute, Kunzler sidestepped the rabid man and watched in glory as the cannibal tripped into a rising batch of flames that had made its way to the rooftop.

“Burn!!!” Kunzler yelled as he watch the flames rip the flesh from the bones of the screaming cannibal.

Jon also managed to discard of his attackers, breaking one of their necks, and slamming the others head against the stone floor of the fiery rooftop. Jon and Kunzler then regrouped. There were no longer any living cannibals as a threat, but they were still outnumbered eight to two. They now stood opposite the cult once again, and the flames from below had now surrounded the entire roof. It was only a matter of time before the building became irreversibly weakened from the wild flames and caved in.

“My son,” Jon said, breathing heavily. “I want him back. Now.”

There was a sudden rumbling noise and a vibration was sent through the roof. Something within the building must have collapsed from the intense flames.

“Give me my son back,” Jon told the eerily silent cult.

As Jon and Kunzler attempted to study what they could see of the cultists faces, there was a strange confidence about them that bothered the two distraught men. Why weren't the cult worried about being burned to death? They were stuck on the roof just like Jon and Kunzler. There seemed to be no more room for tricks or mind games. It was simply the cult versus Jon and Kunzler, and something had to eventually give.

“I'll tell you one more time,” Jon said coldly. “Give my son to me.”

In response to the demand, seven of the eight cultists (since one of them was holding Jacob) drew wickedly long, impossibly sharp knives from within their cloaks. And all of them smiled sickeningly.

Jon then balled his fists and, with Kunzler, engaged in an attack on the cult. Jon ran forward and didn't give either cultist any time to swing their knives. He tackled one of them to the ground and began pounding away with his elbow. At about the fifth consecutive elbow, the cultist's entire body went completely limp, and Jon figured that he'd rendered the demon unconscious. He then quickly pried the cultist's knife from its gloved hand right as two others came at him. Jon stood to his feet as fast as he could and sent the knife's nearly sword like blade through the midsection of one of his attackers, causing the cultist to double over in pain. He then kned it in the face just as the other cultist sent its knife through Jon's shoulder, handle deep. Jon howled in pain as he was subsequently brought to his knees. The cultist then stood behind a fallen Jon, like a predator towering over a wounded prey. The cultist yanked the blade from Jon's shoulder and sent it through the same wound again. Another scream from Jon Williams filled the night's air as it seemed ever so clearly now what his fate was to be all along.

Jon slowly began to lose a grip on his senses. His vision began to blur and his mind began to swim. It became filled with very frightening thoughts and memories. He truly believed that he was well on his way to dying now. The cultist standing over him slowly pulled the long knife from Jon's wound again. He positioned it right above Jon's head, ready to plunge the blood stained steel through Jon's skull. But that didn't happen. Suddenly, from behind, a blade was violently sent through the cultist's skull instead, causing it to limply collapse to the ground.

“Get up!!!” Kunzler yelled out to Jon.

Jon managed to make it back to his feet, but was clearly in a world of pain. Kunzler took one of Jon's arms and threw it over his shoulder in order to help his wounded friend walk.

“Being in with law enforcement for as long as me can really show ya how to defend yourself,” Kunzler breathed as he supported a wounded Jon. “I think I killed two of...”

The two cultists that Kunzler thought he had killed were suddenly launching themselves towards the both of them.

“Shit!!!” Kunzler yelled.

He knew that Jon wouldn't be able to properly defend himself. Right at the last minute, Kunzler shoved Jon away from him and leapt clear of the danger himself, causing the two cultists to land in a large, roaring wall of viciously intense flames.

There were only three cultists left now, minus the one that was standing in a corner holding Jacob. Jon began to slowly rise to his feet once again. His wounded shoulder had been ceaselessly bleeding now and every time his heart pumped, the shoulder would throb with a piercing pain that affected all of the nerves in his body. Regardless of the wound and the pain he now felt, he picked up one of the knives from the ground and slowly began sauntering towards the druid that held his child. Kunzler, too, retrieved one of the knives from the ground and joined Jon. However, the three remaining cultists stood in their way, side by side, wielding knives of their own.

Jon wearily looked at each of them. “I just want my son back,” he said.

The cultists responded by attacking, two of them teaming up to take out Kunzler. Jon managed to back away and evade the swing attempts of his attacker, but he didn't know what he'd do if it came to having to use his wounded arm. The cultist suddenly clasped one of his hands around Jon's neck, and slowly pinned the wounded man to the floor. The life began to slowly drain from Jon's body as the cultists' grip became stronger. Jon could hear the cultists grunting with rage as it literally choked the life out of him. If this continued, Jon knew that it would only be mere moments before he was finally dead. He had already lost a lot of blood from the vicious shoulder wound, and now, here he was being choked unconscious. Jon attempted to use his strong arm to pry the cultists' hand from his neck, but it was no use. He was already incredibly fatigued, and the cultist was too strong. After a few more moments, Jon's body began to grow limp.

Kunzler had managed to kill one of the cultists that had attacked him, but the other one was now on his back and had him in a lethal choke hold. Kunzler, just like Jon, was on the verge of unconsciousness, but he at least had a small bit of strength left in him. Out of the corner of Kunzler's eye, he noticed that Jon's attacker had him on the ground, helpless, and was slowly raising a knife above Jon's chest.

“No,” Kunzler breathed.

Then, the former sheriff of Grovesford made a very desperate suicide move. Kunzler ran over to the cultist that was getting ready to kill Jon, with his own attacker still on his back, choking him. The cultist, caught by surprise, noticed Kunzler at the very last minute and stood to his feet with his knife in hand. Then, right before Kunzler collided with him, the cultist plunged his knife deep into Kunzler's chest. Despite the sudden wound, Kunzler managed to knock the cultist over the edge of the cathedral's fiery rooftop. It was a bittersweet moment, however, as the cultist held onto Kunzler's arm as it was sent over the edge, bringing Kunzler with him. Now, Kunzler, with the knife still plunged deeply into his chest, fell through the flames to the earth below alongside the two cultists.

Jon Williams shakily stood to his feet. His vision was slightly blurred, but he could clearly make out the cultist holding Jacob standing a few feet before him.

“Jacob....” Jon murmured.

Jon slowly began walking towards the lone cultist.

Left foot,

Right.

Left.

He sauntered wobbly towards the cultist, keeping his eyes on Jacob.

Left.

Right.

There was another rumbling from within the cathedral, and yet another violent vibration, like that of an earthquake. It was obvious that the building was currently on its last leg. Regardless, Jon continued walking unarmed slowly towards his son, and the cultist holding him.

Suddenly, from a massive wall of fire behind him, one of the cultists lurched forward towards Jon, screeching with unmitigated rage, it's entire body brilliantly ablaze, it's arms outstretched, it's demonically red eyes glowing with searing violence. Jon sensed the danger behind him, but knew that there was no time to react. Instead, he reached for Jacob just as the entire cathedral finally collapsed. The building began to loudly rumble until all of the stones, pillars, and towers crumbled. The roof eventually caved in, causing Jon, the two cultists, and Jacob to begin falling to their potential deaths. Suddenly, all at once, the cultist holding Jacob let the terrified child go, the flaming cultist grabbed a hold of Jon's neck, and Jon, after a bit of a struggle, snatched his son in mid air..... and clutched him close right before they hit the ground.

XX.

Little Star Grovesford Memorial Hospital, often abbreviated as GMH, was a large medical facility located just beyond Grovesford's residential area. It currently supported hundreds of rooms, ranging from ER's to resting rooms, all of which were almost always full. Most of the people that were rushed into the hospital

never left alive. A lot of them were lucky enough to leave with life altering injuries and such. Now, GMH's newest entrants were Jon Williams, and the former sheriff of Grovesford, Alabama, Matthew Kunzler. Whether by sheer luck, or the hand of fate, the both of them had survived the ordeal that took place only two nights earlier, and were very much alive.

In the two nights following the battle on the top of what used to be the Grovesford Cathedral, Jon had remained in a coma. It was nothing severe, but the massive amounts of blood he'd lost and the incredible damage that he'd taken had finally surmounted. However, he began to stir one night at around midnight, and soon, he was once again fully conscious. He opened his eyes and casually examined his new surroundings. His vision was blurry for a little while, but as he began to move his eyes more, his vision cleared up and he could tell that he had been hospitalized.

Jon slowly sat up in his hospital bed and noticed that there was a blonde haired nurse sitting at his bedside, writing something down on a clipboard. "What happened?" he asked, not recalling too much of anything from the past week or so.

The nurse stopped writing and smiled at Jon. "You're awake," she said. "Good."

"What happened?" Jon asked her again.

"Well," she said, not wanting to worry him. "You and Matt Kunzler had a bit of an accident. Both of you nearly died. He's alright now. He's recovering in another room."

"My son," Jon said, remembering that Jacob had been kidnapped from him. "Is Jacob here?"

The nurse smiled at him again. "You saved his life," she said warmly.

Then, even though his head throbbed with an intense pain, Jon began to smile too.

"He's in another room. He's been eating and sleeping a lot lately, but he's just tired apparently. You wanna see him?"

Jon had been waiting for this moment for a very long time now. "Yeah," he said as he began to crawl out of his bed.

"It's okay," the nurse said. "I can bring him in here with you."

The nurse told Jon that she'd be right back and left his room to retrieve Jacob, and Jon sat in silence as he waited for her to return. He waited, only hearing the steady tick-tock of the clock on the white wall before him. As he waited, Jon tried his best to recall the events that took place two days ago. He obviously knew

that it must have had something to do with the cult. I must have been with Kunzler at the time. He's here too, he thought to himself. Jon only managed to remember bits and pieces of what happened to him, but in the end, he figured, the most important thing to know was that Jacob was finally safe.

Jon stared up at the clock's hands as they circled past the twelve multiple times. He was sure that nearly fifteen minutes had passed. What's taking her? Jon wondered. It seemed that he'd been sitting and waiting for an eternity, but the nurse never returned with Jacob. Eventually, Jon had had enough of waiting and decided to try and find Jacob's room himself. He removed the white sheets from over his legs and crawled out of the hospital bed.

As he stood to his feet, he began to hear music.

“What the hell....” he breathed.

It wasn't any normal hospital music either. To him, it sounded eerily like..... Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

Jon's hands began to tremble with fear. “No.....,” he whispered as he slowly made his way to his room door, twisted the knob, pulled it open, and stepped out into the hallway.

There were bodies everywhere.

The soft lullaby filled the bland halls of the GMH as Jon stared on wide eyed at the carnage before him. The bodies of nurses, doctors, and God knew who else, were skinned and somehow unrecognizably and incredibly charred and strewn throughout the white halls. The flesh on some of the bodies were still melting off of the burned skeletons, emanating waves of smoke and steam. At the very end of the hallway, was a door that stood slightly ajar. It was from that room that the music had been coming from.

“Jacob,” Jon said as tears began to form in his eyes.

Jon slowly began walking towards the room and every step he took felt like an eternity. He could only hope and pray
in his mind that Jacob was still in the room and was safe. He could only pray and hope.

As he passed the bodies of the murdered hospital staff, he was relieved that he didn't see any that resembled Kunzler. Still, he couldn't have been sure since most of them were quite unrecognizable. For some of them, Jon couldn't even tell if they were male or female, yet, every one he passed and glanced over gave him chills. It was like walking through an overpopulated graveyard. It was unnerving.

Jon finally reached the door. The music was very audible now, and Jon was sure that it was Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. The soft, gentle lullaby sounded more like the music of the devil to Jon now more than ever. It almost made Jon afraid to push the door all the way open, but he had to see if Jacob was alive or not.

Before looking inside the room, Jon slowly glanced over his shoulder to ensure that there was no one attempting to sneak up on him. To his relief, there was no one. However, to his horror all of the destroyed bodies were now somehow facing him, as if they were all an audience in a theater viewing a film. Jon's heart nearly leapt out of his chest, but he maintained his composure, figuring that this was all just another mind trick. Then, he finally summoned the courage, and gently pushed the door open all the way, and peered inside.

There was a tiny crib sitting peacefully in the center of the small room....

..... but Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star softly haunted the foreboding atmosphere as Jon discovered that Jacob was no longer there.....

-End

This is a legally distributed free edition from www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law.
You are licensed to download this digital copy strictly for your personal use only: it must not be redistributed or offered for sale in any form.