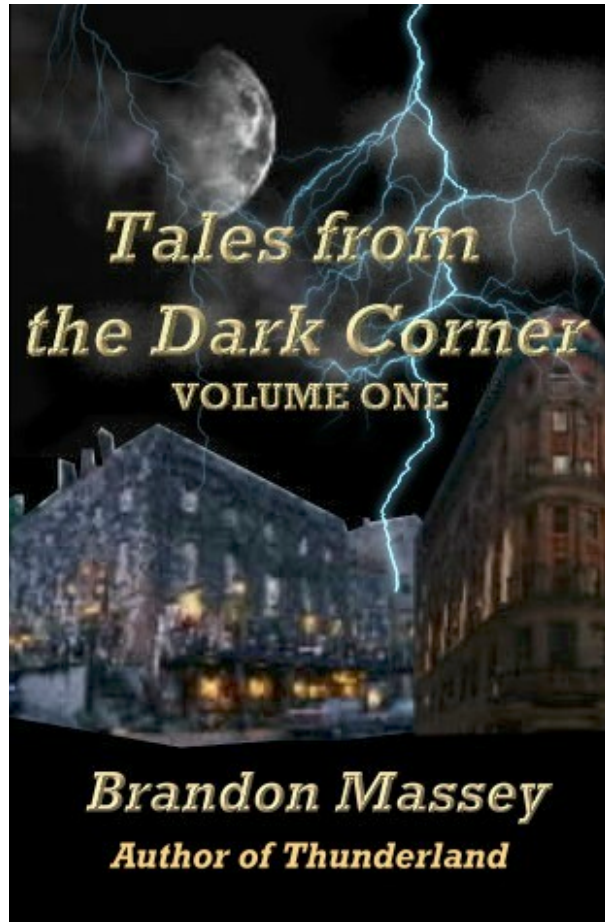


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Tales from the Dark Corner: Volume One

by Brandon Massey

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Tales from the Dark Corner: Volume One

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So one of my hopes is that by sharing my stories with you in this fashion, you'll be interested in checking out my books. THUNDERLAND, my first novel, will hit the stores in December 2002. If you like these stories here, I think you'll enjoy THUNDERLAND, too.

And what if you've already read (and hopefully, enjoyed) THUNDERLAND? Then consider this free ebook to be my gift to you. I am grateful for every reader who takes the time and spends the money to read my work, and I want to give something back to you. After all, there are thousands of books out there. I'd be a fool not to appreciate your choosing mine.

You can email me at brandon@brandonmassey.com and tell me what you think about my stories. I'd be happy to hear from you.

Now . . . let me show you what goes on in a place that has special meaning for me. Strange, wonderful--and sometimes, terrifying--things happen there. It's like nowhere else that you've ever been. It's my own private pocket of the world.

I call it The Dark Corner.

And you know what? Something's going on right now in The Dark Corner. Curious? Let's go see what it is . . .

Dead to the World

The man kept calling about his check . . .

"Where's my check?"

Sitting at my desk in my tiny cubicle, rocking slowly in my chair, I bolted upright and tightened my grip on the telephone handset. Don't let this guy be another one, I prayed. I'd been answering calls for two hours that morning, and I'd taken enough blows from irate policyowners to leave me feeling like a punching bag. I didn't have the endurance to face another angry customer. After all, during my drive to work, I had miraculously avoided what could have been a fatal collision with an eighteen-wheeler. I wanted to spend the day gazing out the window, silently thanking God for sparing my life.

Please, let this guy be a quick transfer to another department.

"Before I can answer your question, sir, I'll need your policy number," I said. "Can you give that number to me, please?"

He rattled off a series of digits. As he spoke, I entered the numbers on my computer. His policy information, visible in green type, filled the black display.

The Chicago-based company I worked for, Lake Shore Insurance, offered medical, disability, group life, and individual life coverage. Separate departments administered each kind of insurance; I worked in the individual life area. Although our toll-free number gave callers a department menu that should have always connected them to the appropriate areas, in the course

of a day I often transferred a dozen misdirected calls. But there would be no quick transfer this time. As I studied the screen, I saw that this guy had an individual life policy. Great.

I steeled myself for the oncoming abuse. "And what is your name, sir?"

"Ralph E. Stone, from Peoria, Illinois. Ain't you got that on your screen, boy?"

"Yes, sir, I do, but I needed to confirm your identity," I said. "Okay, Mr. Stone, you were calling about a check?"

"A loan check," he said. "Thousand bucks I need, I'm in a real tight spot. I sent you folks a letter a few weeks ago, but you ain't sent me nothing yet. So now I'm calling about it. Where's my goddamn money?"

"I'll see if I can find out, Mr. Stone. Can you hold for just a moment?"

"Hurry it up."

Oh, shut up, I thought as I put him on hold. I half-wished that I hadn't been so lucky that morning; a bruise or two that would have justified a brief hospital visit would have been preferable to coming here. On days such as these, I believed that if God ever decided to condemn me to hell, he would put me somewhere exactly like this, to deal with mad customers for all eternity.

I tapped the keyboard, flipping through various screens, searching for information about a loan transaction. I learned two things. One, no loan check had ever been mailed to Stone. Two, Ralph Stone had died on February 12th, three weeks ago. The ten-thousand-dollar death benefit had been paid to his beneficiary and sister, Irene Stone.

Obviously, something was screwed up.

I picked up the phone.

"My check on the way?" Stone said.

"Well, sir . . . no. It seems we have some incorrect information on our system. According to our records, you died on the twelfth of February." I chuckled, as if such a thing were funny.

Stone laughed, too. "Then your computer's a piece of shit, boy, cause it's wrong as wrong could be. I wouldn't be calling if I were dead, would I?"

"Of course not," I said. "I apologize for this. I'm not sure how this happened."

"One of you crackbrains up there messed up my policy, that's how it happened."

"We're only human," I said. And some of us are pigs.

"This better not keep me from getting my check, boy."

"No, sir, I promise you it won't. This is a minor error. We'll fix this in no time and get your money out to you."

"You better," he said. "I been paying a lot of cash into this damned thing, and my agent said I could draw some of it out after I'd kept up the payments a few years. He better not've lied to me. Liars don't sit well with me, boy."

"Your agent isn't a liar, sir, and neither am I. We'll fix this and give you your money as soon as possible. In fact, instead of passing this along to someone else, I'll take care of it myself. How about if I order your file, take a look at it, and call you back later today?"

"What's your name, boy?"

"Kevin," I said. "Kevin Jackson."

"I'll call you," Stone said, and hung up.

* * *

An hour later, I opened Ralph Stone's thick manilla file.

The first thing I saw was the top sheet, a printed document that gives you almost all the information you would ever need on a policy: name of insured, date of issue, face amount, beneficiary, and modal premium, to name a few. When the insured died, the claim adjustor stamped the date of death on the top sheet. And because colleagues thoroughly checked and double-checked the adjustor's work, it was highly unlikely that a top sheet would ever be stamped in error. In my dealings with thousands of files, I had never seen it happen.

Nevertheless, that blood-red stamp glared at me from the top sheet:

DECEASED 2-12-2000

Impossible. I had talked to Ralph Stone on the telephone.

Hadn't I?

Searching for some error that would make sense of all this, I dug through the file, spreading papers across my desk.

I found a certified copy of the death certificate, which validated the date of death as February 12th. Full name of decedent was Ralph Edward Stone. No wife. Usual occupation was truck driving. Cause of death was a heart attack. Age at death was fifty-three. Place of death was his home in Peoria, Illinois. Informant--the person who had reported his death--was Irene Stone, sister, who also lived in Peoria, though not at Ralph's address. Irene had discovered him dead on the couch at seven o'clock in the evening.

I found a copy of his driver's license. Ralph E. Stone was six-feet-two, two hundred and fifty pounds. He had a large, square face covered with a woolly grey beard. A pug nose and cold,

squinting blue eyes. He was scowling in the photograph, as if angered at the idea of needing a license to drive his vehicle. All of the data on the card matched the data in the file.

Lastly, I found a letter written in sloppy manuscript on yellow notebook paper: *Give me a loan for a thousand dollars. My agent said I could get money after I kept this thing for a few years. I need money now, so send it right away. Thanks, Ralph E. Stone.*

The letter was postmarked February 11th. The day before Stone had apparently died of a heart attack.

Looking at these things, I felt as though I might suffer a heart attack myself. What was going on here?

Was the man I had talked to earlier an imposter trying to chisel money out of us? Or was he really . . .

No, don't even consider it, because that's crazy.

The man was nothing but a swindler. In my three years at this company, I'd heard about his type. They were doctors who sent in fake claims, insureds who were healthy and working yet tried to get disability benefits, agents who forged applications and got the fat commissions--the insurance industry teemed with treacherous people who'd do anything to grab a dishonest buck. This case was just a little stranger than usual. One call to Irene Stone, the sister (who, incidentally, also had a policy with us that Ralph had been paying for), would clear up everything.

I picked up the phone.

A woman answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"This is Kevin Jackson, from Lake Shore Insurance. May I please speak to Ms. Irene Stone?"

"Speaking." Her voice was frail, whispery. "This isn't about my brother, is it?"

I hesitated. I wished I'd taken the time to plan my conversation. How could you tell a woman that you were getting calls from a man claiming to be her dead brother--without upsetting her? That lesson wasn't taught in any of the customer service classes I'd attended.

"Because if you're calling about Ralph, I'm afraid I can't say much," she said. She sighed heavily. "It still hurts me to talk about him."

"That's perfectly understandable, ma'am. I don't want to upset you, but--"

"He was such a sweetheart, Ralph was," she said. "Took care of me like a father. The man *believed* in family, would do anything for his kin. You don't see that as much these days."

"My deepest sympathies to you, ma'am. But I got a call--"

"I'll never get over his passing. Never." She sniffled, and I feared she was about to break down and weep. "No one ever cared about me as much as Ralph did."

"I'm sure you're right, ma'am. I'm sure Mr. Stone was an honorable man. By the way, do you happen to know anyone who might try to impersonate him so he could con money out of an insurance company?"

"Ralph was so . . . what did you say?" she said, a sudden edge to her voice.

I mentally kicked myself in the butt. Wasn't I just brimming with tact? I ought to open a charm school and educate the less-graceful masses.

Determined not to make another gaffe like that, I pressed on. "I hate to discuss this with you, Ms. Stone, but I received a call today from a man who says he's your brother, Ralph E. Stone. He's demanding that we mail him a loan check. He made reference to an actual written loan request from your brother that was postmarked February 11th. And, of course . . . Mr. Stone died on the twelfth, so we never processed the loan. But the man who called me is very convincing. He insists that we mistakenly declared him dead."

"Why're you calling me? I sent you a copy of Ralph's death certificate, didn't I?"

"Yes. But--"

"What else do you need? His poor dead body sent overnight mail?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I only wanted to verify--"

"Mister, these past few weeks have been absolute hell for me, and you've just made it worse with your crazy goddamned questions. If this is the kind of compassion I can expect from my insurance company, I don't want anything more to do with you people. Cancel my policy immediately--with a full refund of every cent Ralph ever paid into it!"

Click.

She had hung up on me. I can't say I blamed her; I'd figured my call would piss her off. But I needed to be sure about this guy. And now that I was, I knew what I had to do.

Wait for him to call me back.

* * *

I didn't have to wait long. Barely fifteen minutes after I finished speaking to Irene Stone, my telephone rang again.

"Got it all straightened out, boy?" the man claiming to be Ralph Stone said.

"I sure do," I said. I leaned back in my chair, took a sip of coffee. "You're dead, Mr. Stone."

Silence. Then: "Come again?"

"I found your death certificate in the file. You died on February twelfth--a day *after* your written loan request was postmarked. I'm sure you remember, sir. Dying of a heart attack has to be hard to forget."

Stone chuckled. "I died of a heart attack, eh? I can't say I remember, though I reckon I should." He chuckled again, then cleared his throat. "Now look, boy, I've had enough of these jokes. I need--"

"I need a break from your con act!" I said, speaking louder than I had intended, rising halfway out of my chair. I drew a deep breath, sat down. "Listen, whoever you are, I'm not buying your story. Mr. Stone died, we paid the benefits to his sister, and we've officially closed his file. You aren't getting a dime, so you can quit this tired act of yours. Now good-bye, sir, and please don't call again."

Without waiting for his response, I hung up. I pressed the button on the telephone that would automatically send any calls for me to my voice mail. It went without saying that if he called again and left me a message, I would not return his call. As far as I was concerned, I'd had my last conversation with Mr. Whatever-his-real-name-was.

Pleased at how I had handled the situation, I finished off my coffee and went to lunch.

* * *

When I returned from lunch, I saw the blinking message indicator on my telephone. I frowned, certain of who had called.

I listened to the message. It was him, of course. Mr. Whatever-his-real-name-was.

"You've went and made this personal, boy. I'm in a real tight spot, and *you're* jerking me around with some nutty story about me dying of a heart attack. I wasn't a whiz in school, but I'll be damned if I'm dumb enough to fall for your bullshit. My agent said I could get a loan, and I'm

gonna get it. So I'm coming up there, boy. Leaving within the hour, ought to get there by this afternoon. And when I stop in, you better have my check ready. Or else."

He slammed down the phone, a sharp sound that hurt my ear.

My heart was suddenly pounding.

Of all the reactions I had expected from him, I had never expected this.

I opened Stone's file, flipped to the copy of his driver's license. In his early fifties. Square face, wooly grey beard, pug nose. Cold, squinting blue eyes. An angry scowl.

You've made this personal, boy.

This was madness. Sheer insanity.

Ralph Stone was dead. The death certificate said so, and the sister said so. This imposter was blowing smoke. He wasn't getting a thing from me, and he knew it. He probably wasn't actually driving up here. He was only trying to scare me.

And I had to admit that he was doing a good job of it.

* * *

Work proceeded as usual until a few minutes after three o'clock that afternoon. Then my phone rang. It was the receptionist.

"A man named Ralph Stone is waiting in the lobby for you," the receptionist said. She coughed a couple of times. "He says you should have a check for him."

I was speechless. I sat there holding the handset to my ear, like a poster boy for AT&T.

"Will you come down here and meet him, please?" the receptionist said. She coughed again.

Tell her no, a voice in me pleaded. Tell her to get security to kick the man off company property. Tell her that talking to psycho con men isn't in my job description.

But I said none of those things. I only said: "I'll be down there in a minute."

Coughing as if she'd caught a terrible cold, the receptionist thanked me and hung up.

I gathered Ralph Stone's file and walked to the elevator.

Ordinarily, I always take the stairs, for the exercise. That time, however, I didn't feel confident about my ability to make it down the stairs without my trembling legs giving way and spilling me on my face.

* * *

The elevator doors whooshed open.

About fifteen feet away, a man turned from the reception desk and looked at me as I entered the lobby.

Right away, I knew this man was no imposter. He looked exactly like Ralph Stone.

That is, if Ralph Stone had climbed out of the grave after having been dead for three weeks.

He still appeared to be about six-feet two, but seemed to weigh not two-fifty, but three-fifty, maybe more; his body was round and swollen, nearly bursting out of the shearling jacket and jeans that he wore. Large blisters marred his bloated face; the skin had a strange green-red tint, and seemed to be loose, ready to drip like hot wax from his skull. Half of the hairs of his wooly grey beard had fallen out, the remaining hairs limp and colorless. The cold, squinting blue eyes were now flat, and so clouded up with fluid that they seemed as white as the eyeballs of a voodoo priest caught up in the ecstasy of spirit possession.

And the smell. Jesus. No wonder the receptionist had been coughing when she'd spoken to me on the phone. Such a stench filled the air that I felt as though I had stepped into a busy slaughterhouse on a hot August day.

The man--or what had once been a man--shuffled toward me, muddy black boots dragging across the carpet.

The lobby was warm, but a chill gripped me.

To hell with trying to explain his presence. I didn't want to know the inexplicable details. I only wanted to get him out of there.

He stopped a few feet away from me, planted his discolored fists on his soft waist, and scrutinized me from head to toe with his milky pupils.

This close, the stench was too much. I backed up a little, covered my nose with my forearm.

I thought I saw a maggot quivering in his nostril.

"You the boy I talked to?" he said, his voice somehow strong and clear.

"Yes. I'm Kevin Jackson."

He grunted. "Got my check?"

"No, I don't," I said. I clumsily opened the file, riffled through the various documents. Talk about absurd. What was nuttier than explaining a death claim to the decedent?

"See here, Mr. Ralph Stone--or you, since I know that's who you are now--died on February twelfth. The death benefits were paid to your sister, Irene. The policy has been terminated. I don't know what else I can tell you, sir. I can't give you anything. Sorry."

Gazing at the file, viewing his own death certificate, he pursed his split lips. "You folks never stop bull-shitting, do you?"

"Excuse me?"

He slapped the file out of my hand.

Then he seized me by the front of my shirt.

"No more lies! Give me my goddamn check!"

He shook me hard, in spite of his bloodless muscles that must have gone soft.

His mouth, only inches from my face, spewed forth fetid breath that struck me like a blow. I wanted to faint, but my body didn't cooperate.

A security guard ran up to us. He clapped a hand on Stone's shoulder. "Hey, mister, let go of--"

With stunning quickness, Stone released me and spun around and punched the guard in the nose, his fist bursting and spilling fluids like a giant pimple.

The guard dropped to the carpet, holding his bleeding nose.

Seemingly unaware of his ruined hand, Stone whirled to face me.

"Your turn, boy."

I bolted across the lobby, into the waiting area, where several upholstered sofas and pine end tables sat.

I needed some kind of weapon, and I had a vague idea that something suitable might be over there--though what could hurt a man who was already dead?

Stone pursued me, shambling like something out of a horror flick.

Hadn't he looked in the mirror lately? Didn't he realize that he had died? Or was he so dead to the world that not even seeing the mushy stump that had once been his hand could awaken him to the truth?

Soon, only a sofa separated us. He drummed his fat fingers on top of it, grinning at me with teeth that would've given my dentist nightmares.

"When I get done with you, boy, you're gonna need your own death certificate."

He chuckled, a nasty wet sound.

He slung one leg over the couch, began to clamber over it.

As I moved away, the back of my legs hit something. I reached behind me. I touched the solid surface of an end table.

Stone was almost across the sofa.

"And after you, I'm gonna take care of that lying sonofabitch agent who sold me that policy."

It was either him or me. And since he was dead already, I figured I had the right to keep on living.

So I snatched up the table, raised it high, and brought it down on his skull with all the force I could muster.

His head exploded like a watermelon hit with a sledgehammer; rotted flesh and stinking liquids splattering everywhere.

The headless corpse rolled off the couch and thudded to the floor at my feet. It lay there. Motionless. Silent.

I wiped cold sweat off my brow.

The entire bizarre episode seemed to have occurred in some realm of hell, but, thankfully, it was over.

In addition to the security guard who'd taken the punch in the nose, a couple of company housekeepers had gathered around, their wheeled garbage cans beside them. They held their noses.

"Why don't we get this mess cleaned up, guys?" I said. "Come on, I'll help you."

Strangely, not one person who had witnessed the incident ventured an opinion about Stone. All of us maintained a weird code of silence, keeping our thoughts to ourselves, preserving our feelings for later reflections--or nightmares.

It took a while, but we managed to clean up the cadaver and remove all signs that it had ever been in the lobby. I believe people deserve a proper burial in a respectable cemetery, but Stone wasn't getting another one of those. One was enough. This time, he was getting shipped to the local trash incinerator.

When we finished, I returned upstairs.

* * *

I sat behind my desk. Drew a few rejuvenating breaths. Took a sip of coffee.

Finally, ready to work again, I grabbed the next file from the stack of them on my tray. I opened it.

I saw my full name written on the topsheet: KEVIN PAUL JACKSON.

What?

I looked closer.

And then I saw that familiar blood-red stamp on the topsheet:

DECEASED 3-6-2000

"No," I said, my face flushed with heat.

I tore into the file, found the death certificate, and read the cause of death.

Internal injuries due to auto accident.

Auto accident? That couldn't be. At the last instant, I had avoided the collision with the eighteen-wheeler. It had been close, a miracle, actually, but I had escaped. No, this was a joke, and it wasn't funny at all. I was going to find out who had pulled this prank. I was going to find them and--

My phone rang.

Automatically, I picked it up.

"Good afternoon, this is Kevin Jackson. How may I help you?"

"Where's my check?" It was a woman, with a thick Brooklyn accent.

On days such as these, I believed that if God ever decided to condemn me to hell, he would put me somewhere exactly like this, to deal with mad customers for all eternity.

Realizing the truth, I didn't say a word to the woman.

I dropped the phone, grabbed fistfuls of my hair, and began to cry . . . soft, weeping sounds that would stay with me forever.

Daddy's Little Girl

He only wanted the best for his daughter . . .

"Nathan, I'd like you to meet my dad."

I offered my hand, and the bearish man in front of me swallowed it in his massive grip. Swallowed it and squeezed--hard. Pain snapped through my fingers and traveled up my arm. I tried to conceal my anguish when I addressed him.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Payne. I'm Nathan . . . Hunter." I forced the words out of my mouth; it was a struggle to keep from whining like a puppy. He continued to smash my hand in his grip.

Mr. Payne grunted. He was the hairiest man I'd ever seen. He had an Afro, a grizzly black beard, crisp hairs covering his muscular arms, and hair on the back of his meaty hands so dense he probably had to comb it. No doubt, in winter, he didn't need to wear a coat. His natural fur probably served just fine.

He barely resembled his daughter. Stacy was short and petite, her skin as smooth as cream, her exotic features framed by long black hair. She stood beside us as we shook hands, and though a smile creased her lovely face, her eyes held a trace of apprehension.

I understood why. Since we'd met a couple of weeks ago, she had warned me that her father was overprotective and zealously guarded her from potential boyfriends. I'd wanted to see Mr. Payne as early as possible, to reassure him that he could trust me to treat his daughter well, but Stacy had postponed introducing us until then, our third date and our first dinner-and-a-movie

date. She worried that her father might chase me away, and she wanted us to get to know each other without his distracting influence. Now that I'd met Mr. Payne at last, she probably wondered what would go wrong.

I was wondering the same thing, to be honest. It wasn't every day that you got a chance to meet a man who was supposedly guilty of murder.

We finally ended our handshake. My hand throbbed. This guy was *strong*.

"You've got a good grip," I said. "It must come from all of the working out that Stacy tells me that you do."

"I get my strength from other sources," Mr. Payne said. He had a baritone voice that seemed to originate from deep within his enormous chest. "Sources beyond your comprehension, young man."

What a strange response. Frowning, I noticed Mr. Payne's eyes. They were liquid black, with a wild, mischievous gleam: the kind of eyes that belonged in a predator who took delight in torturing its prey before it consummated the kill.

I would have to be careful with this man. My superiors believed that I was capable of bringing Mr. Payne to justice with no problem, but I wasn't sure. My greatest advantage in this investigation was that neither Stacy nor her father suspected my intentions. But no veteran detective--especially one who specialized in my unique line of work--would risk dropping his guard and blowing his cover. The consequences could be deadly.

Although I'd finally met Mr. Payne, I could not ask him probing questions that might create suspicion. I'd play it cool, date his daughter as though I were a regular guy, quietly gathering more clues . . . and when the picture was complete, I'd carry out my orders to bring the felon to justice.

I checked my watch. "I'm sorry, but we have to get going, Mr. Payne. It's been nice meeting you."

"You two will get a chance to talk some other time, I'm sure," Stacy said.

Mr. Payne grumbled. "You'll have her back by ten o'clock. My little girl has a curfew."

Stacy looked embarrassed. She was twenty-two years old, a grown woman. Was Mr. Payne serious?

"Ten o'clock is a little early," I said. "The movie might not be over by then. How about eleven?" I felt odd asking her father such a question.

Danger flared in his eyes. "You seem to have forgotten who is in control here, young man. You are dating my daughter, and I decide whom she chooses to date, where she goes on her date, and when she will return from each date. Her curfew is ten o'clock. If you have a problem with that, not only will Stacy not accompany you this evening, I will permanently ban her from communicating with you. Understood?"

"Uh, well, sure," I said. "Ten o'clock. Yes, sir."

Stacy laughed.

"Oh, Daddy, you're too much," she said. "Nathan is the nicest guy I've ever dated." She slipped her arm through mine and smiled at him.

Mr. Payne's eyes softened when he regarded his daughter. I could see that he really loved her. Her mother--and his wife--had died eight years ago, leaving him to raise Stacy on his own. Stacy was all he had left. I empathized, a little, with his overbearing attitude.

But when he turned to me, a threat flickered like fire in his eyes. I realized two facts. One: my investigation into Mr. Payne's crimes would end inconclusively if I botched the evening and

Mr. Payne barred me from seeing his daughter, since she was my pipeline to his life. Two: Mr. Payne, as my superiors had warned me, was as scary as hell.

"Ten o'clock," Mr. Payne said. When I nodded and started to turn away, he said something else that I would not understand until later.

"I'll be watching."

* * *

As I drove to the restaurant, Stacy turned down the volume on the stereo and said, "My dad's something else, isn't he?"

I shrugged. "He's obviously concerned about your welfare. Kind of overbearing, I admit."

"In his eyes, I'm always daddy's little girl. No guy I bring home is good enough for him. I could spend all night telling him how great you are, and he'd still treat you as if you'd crawled from under a rock somewhere."

"I felt like a suspected criminal."

"Ever since what happened to Mom, family has become extremely important to him. No man I meet will get in the family without Dad putting him through the wringer. He only wants the best for me."

"I guess that makes sense," I said. "If I had a daughter, I wouldn't want her spending time with a loser, either."

"You can't understand how Mom's death changed things for him, for both of us." She shook her head. "You wouldn't believe it."

This could be a good opportunity to gain more information about her father's history. I said, "Want to tell me about it?"

"Not now, Nathan, it would spoil the mood. Later, I promise."

I drummed the steering wheel. Patience, I assured myself. I'd eventually uncover her father's secrets.

I glanced at Stacy. Secrets glimmered in her dark, beautiful eyes, and her mystique only made me want her more. This was something that complicated my investigation; I had never thought I would start to fall for her. More often, I wondered what I had gotten myself into when I accepted this assignment, and where it would lead.

We arrived at the restaurant, a popular steak house. She went to open her door. I touched her arm, stopping her.

"Answer me honestly, Stacy. Do you think I'll ever measure up to your father's expectations?"

Impulsively, she leaned into me and kissed me. Or *tasted* me, rather, since that was what her lips and tongue brought to mind. Purring like a cat, she tasted my lips, chin, and cheeks as if I were a juicy slice of meat. Her kisses were like nothing I had ever experienced. There was something primitive and wild about them that made me want to explode.

She let go of me and licked her lips, as though tasting me still.

My heart pounded.

"You measure up to *my* expectations," she said. "In the end, that's all that will matter."

She winked at me, and we got out of the car.

Inside, the hostess guided us to a booth. Stacy slid onto one side. I was about to take the opposite side when she patted the space beside her.

"Tonight, I want you next to me."

I saw that compelling gleam in her eyes again. Of course, I did as she asked. She smiled at me, a subtle smile as mysterious as her gaze. I could not deny my suspicion that I was not the only one here who had ulterior motives--although I had no idea what she might have planned for me.

We ordered drinks, an appetizer, and steaks. I ordered the ribeye; Stacy requested the massive porterhouse. I looked at her, eyebrows raised. She'd always shown an enormous appetite--on our previous lunch dates, she ate more than I did--but could she put away that much meat?

It didn't take long for my question to be answered. After plowing through the appetizer of Texas cheese fries, then black bean soup, and then tossed green salad, Stacy cut into her steak like a starving woman. She made soft, animal noises of satisfaction as she chewed, yet she pigged out gracefully, like a cat that had mastered the use of silverware.

"Hungry tonight?" I said.

She turned and blinked. Her eyes had a glassy look, as though she had been entranced by the food. "Oh, you mean the porterhouse. This is nothing, sweetie. I could wolf down two of these."

"You're kidding." I looked at the slab of thick, rare meat on her plate, then I checked out her body. She wore a tight green sweater and a black skirt that showcased her taut, shapely figure.

"Where do you put it all?"

"I have a high metabolism. So does Daddy. We eat like wolves and don't gain a pound."

"I see."

"If you hang around me long enough, maybe you'll pick it up, like by osmosis." She gave me that enchanting smile again, hinting at things I could only imagine.

I excused myself to visit the washroom. In the bathroom, I took care of business and went to the sink to wash up. As I stood there soaping my hands, Mr. Payne exited one of the toilet stalls.

I froze. "Uh, hi, Mr. Payne."

He glared at me as he walked to the sinks. "Have you been treating my little girl well?"

"We're having a great time," I said. What was he doing here? Had he followed us? I couldn't ask him those questions, so I said, "She sure enjoys steak."

"She takes after me." He washed his hands. "I love meat. The bloodier, the better." He stared at me. "Nothing tastes as delicious as the blood."

"Yeah," I said. The strange look in his eyes made me wonder if he'd like to slit me open and sample *my blood*. Quickly, I grabbed a towel from the dispenser and began to dry my hands.

Mr. Payne came over to me. He snatched the towel out of my hands.

I gaped at him. I was suddenly aware of how big he was, and painfully aware that we were the only ones in there; the sounds coming from the dining room seemed to be miles away.

Did he know the truth about me? Was that why he was confronting me like this?

Towering over me, he grinned. It wasn't a friendly grin. It was a mouth-wide-open, predatory grin, letting me see the long, sharp canines, teeth that no normal man would have . . . teeth that belonged in the mouth of an animal.

I backed up against the wall.

"I'm watching you," he said. Saliva gleamed on his teeth. "You try anything with my little girl, and you'll wish you'd never met her."

Tension had squeezed my throat like a garrote. I couldn't speak.

No ordinary man could have teeth like that.

Then Mr. Payne shut his mouth with an audible clap. He turned away as if nothing had happened and began to pick his Afro.

"Do you plan on keeping my daughter waiting much longer?" he said. "Or are you as thoughtless and rude as I figured you are?"

Without a word, I got out of there.

Either Mr. Payne was on to me and was attempting to scare me off my investigation, or else he was only trying to scare me away from his daughter. Well, it wouldn't work. I had a job to finish, and I'd stick to it, regardless of how much he made my palms sweat.

Back at the table, Stacy had finished eating. Her plate was so clean it might have come right out of the dishwasher.

"Your father's here," I said. "I saw him in the washroom."

She sighed. "That figures. He's following me again."

"He's done this before?"

She nodded. "With other guys. I'm daddy's little girl, remember? He doesn't want to let me out of his sight."

At the back of the dining room, the bathroom door opened. Mr. Payne emerged, staring at me. He sat at a table across the room, but his location gave him a direct view of us. I could feel his glare boring like a drill into my brain.

"Take a look over there," I said to Stacy. "He's got a perfect view of us."

She didn't look. "I'll take your word for it. It's typical of him."

"Have you asked him to stop doing this?"

"All the time. But it doesn't matter, he does it anyway. He does it whenever he thinks I'm with the wrong guy, which is all the time."

"This is crazy," I said. "You're a grown woman."

"I know how we can get him off our backs, Nathan," she said. "Be patient, okay?"

"What are you going to do?"

But she would not answer; she only gave me that secretive smile.

On our way out, we had to pass by Mr. Payne's table. He had a huge cut of prime rib in front of him. The juicy meat oozed dark blood.

Nothing tastes as delicious as the blood.

Stacy, thankfully, didn't stop to converse. She only said hello. I gave him the same brief greeting. But as I held open the door for her, I looked at him. He watched me, of course, a warning in his savage eyes.

You try anything with my little girl, and you'll wish you'd never met her.

You can't scare me away, I thought. I'm not quitting until I learn the truth.

Mr. Payne didn't say a word, but he held my gaze. Held my gaze as he raised a bloody chunk of meat to his long, sharp teeth.

* * *

At the theater, on Stacy's insistence, we took seats on the far left side, against the wall. We wouldn't have a great view of the screen. But we would have a great opportunity to get closer to each other. The feature film was a romantic comedy, and though I didn't plan on paying much attention to the story, I went to get popcorn for us.

Mr. Payne was in the lobby. He stood at the box office, buying a ticket.

This man was relentless. I understood what he had meant when, before we had left the house, he'd said to me, *I'll be watching you*. He was literally going to tail us all night.

He was messing up everything. I'd thought that I could gradually insinuate myself into Stacy's life--and, by extension, his life--and pick up all the clues I needed to complete my investigation. But Mr. Payne wasn't letting me take that path. He was committed to driving me away before I resolved anything.

I dashed back to Stacy. The theater had darkened; a preview of an upcoming film flashed on the screen.

"Where's the popcorn?" Stacy said.

"I didn't get any. Your dad's here. I saw him buying a ticket."

"Oh, no." She covered her face with her hands.

"If he comes in for this movie, we're going to see something else," I said. "I couldn't stand having him in here."

She sucked in air. "Daddy has never gotten on my nerves this badly. I think he knows there's something special between us. He's scared of what it might lead to."

I frowned. "And what might it lead to?"

"Later," she said. "I'll explain later. Please trust me."

"Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

But she had raised a finger to her lips, motioning behind us.

I turned. I saw a tall, hulking silhouette in the doorway at the back of the theater. There were two aisles, and we were near the left one; slowly, the figure marched down the right aisle, head swiveling back and forth, looking for either a seat--or for us.

"That's him?" I said in a whisper.

"I think so."

I grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's go see something else."

Masked by darkness, we slipped out of there. I did not look back to see if Mr. Payne saw us leave. I had the bizarre notion that if I glanced in his direction, he would be watching me. Like a creature of the night, he seemed to have heightened, almost extraordinary senses.

We entered the theater at the end of the hallway. It was a horror flick, and it was dark inside. Luckily for us, the opening credits had just begun.

We found seats in the same area as before. Far left corner, against the wall. Stacy took the seat near the wall, and I sat beside her. I put my arm around her. She snuggled closer.

"I forgot to ask you," I said, "do you like horror movies?"

"I love them," she said. "Especially monster movies. This is one of those, isn't it?"

"Yeah, something about a werewolf." I recalled the lurid poster beside the movie entrance.

She grinned. "Oooooohh, that's perfect. I only hope it's realistic."

I was about to ask how a film about a werewolf could possibly be realistic, but then she kissed my lips, no, *tasted* my lips, and I didn't care about asking her questions. I didn't even care about her father. I cared only about being with her.

She lay her head on my shoulder. I stroked her lustrous hair.

Maybe we were falling in love. The idea worried me. How could I resolve my case if I were in love with her? Love would make it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out my assigned task.

Rather than mull over the situation, I immersed my attention in the movie. It was a gory show about a pack of werewolves that tore through a quiet Illinois town. The acting was terrible, the dialogue was stilted, and the plotting was choppy, but it nonetheless got a huge response

from the audience, especially Stacy. Every time a werewolf ripped out someone's throat, she whooped, and she sighed with something approaching ecstasy at every drop of spilled blood. I got the weird feeling that she rooted for the werewolves to prevail over the humans.

But I didn't complain. We explored each other's bodies quite a bit during the show. At several points, we become so entangled that I wasn't sure whose limbs were whose. We might never have done any of that if she hadn't been so engaged by the film. Not only was I curious to see if this new level of intimacy would loosen her tongue on family matters. I also, I admit, looked forward to becoming better acquainted with her body.

As the closing credits rolled down the screen, the theater lights brightened. Hands entwined, we stood. I led the way to the crowded aisle . . . and then I glimpsed a familiar shape in the corner of my eye. I spun.

It was Mr. Payne. He stood two rows behind us. He glared hatefully at me. I realized, with despair, that he had witnessed every kiss, every forbidden touch that I had shared with his precious daughter.

Mr. Payne pointed a long finger at me. "You!"

I shrank back. People around us looked, curious and alarmed.

Stacy gripped my hand. "Daddy, you shouldn't have followed us!"

"I'm only looking out for your best interests, sweetheart," he said. His eyes burned into me. "I should kill you."

"Will you relax?" I said. "We only watched a movie!"

"Bullshit. I saw you. You were all over her!"

The crowd snickered. Heat flushed my face. I hated that he had chosen this place to make a scene.

Mr. Payne charged toward us. The crowd fled out of his path like antelope fleeing a lion. Indecision, disbelief, and fear had rooted me in place. I stood there holding Stacy's hand, while fury seethed in her father's eyes. His hands clenched and unclenched, as if in eagerness to crack my neck.

Spurred to move, I pulled Stacy backward. As though she weighed no more than a Barbie doll, Mr. Payne grabbed Stacy by the arm and yanked her toward him. She cried out, her hand slipping out of mine. Using one huge arm to cradle his daughter against him, he thrust his other arm toward me.

"Stay away from my little girl!" He shoved me. I flew backward, tripped on something, and hit the floor.

I lay sprawled in the aisle, gazing at the ceiling.

Agreeing to this assignment had been a mistake. Mr. Payne was too volatile for me to get close enough to him to learn the truth. The safe, slow-moving course of action sanctioned by my superiors was not going to work. If I were to succeed in my mission, I'd have to break protocol.

I was more certain than ever that Mr. Payne was a killer. With his tendency toward violence and fiery temper, I could believe that he had slaughtered several men, as the rumors indicated. All in the name of protecting his lovely daughter.

By the time I got out of the theater, Mr. Payne was roaring out of the parking lot in a silver Cadillac. Stacy was mashed against the rear windshield, mouthing my name.

I raced to my car. I was about to jam the key in the ignition, when I noticed the front of my shirt, in the area of my chest that Mr. Payne had pushed.

A couple of buttons had been torn off. Dark blood--my blood--stained the cotton. The blood had clotted and the small wound didn't hurt--in fact, I hadn't noticed the injury until now, maybe due to my dazed shock. But I thought of Mr. Payne's long, sharp nails. Nails like claws.

Mr. Payne had left me no choice. I opened the glove compartment.

Inside, a revolver gleamed.

It was already loaded. With silver bullets.

* * *

When I arrived at Stacy's house, she answered the door. She ushered me inside.

"I'm so glad you came," she said. "I'm sorry about what happened."

"Your father went nuts," I said. "Is he here?"

"He's out running."

"Running? At this hour?"

"He does it all the time," she said. "I usually go with him, especially when there's a beautiful full moon like there is tonight. But I was mad at him for what he did to you, so I stayed in."

I nodded. "When will he be back?"

"Later." She smiled seductively. "Relax, Nathan. We have plenty of time to pick up where we left off."

She led me to the sofa. She sat on my lap, put her arms around my neck, and leaned toward me. I put my finger on her lips.

"Not now," I said. "We have to talk."

"What's wrong?"

I was going to put everything on the table. "Do you remember Terrel Williams?"

She suddenly drew back. Anxiety lit up her eyes.

"Who is he?" she said, her quavering voice betraying the fact that she knew who I was talking about.

"You dated him three months ago," I said. "You went out with him a few times, until your father apparently decided that he didn't like him. Someone discovered Terrel's body in a forest. His corpse had been mauled, like a pack of wolves had attacked him."

I drew the crime-scene photograph out of my jacket pocket and held it in her face. She gasped. She climbed off my lap, her hand covering her mouth.

"Nathan," she said. "I'm sorry. I . . . I don't know what to say."

I whipped out another grisly photo.

"How about David Taylor, a guy you dated last year? Remember him? Yeah, this rotted corpse with its neck chewed in half doesn't resemble him at all, but I think you know who I'm talking about. Your father hated him, too."

Tears shimmered in her large eyes. She hugged herself.

"Where did you get those pictures from?" she said shakily.

"Doesn't matter." I didn't enjoy forcing her face into this dirt, but it was necessary to stop these games. "We know what's been going on."

"I'm so sorry." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Daddy can't control himself. He gets crazy when he doesn't like the guys that I date--"

"Don't make excuses for him. Your dad is a blood-crazed killer. He's only using his desire to protect you as an excuse to indulge in these wild killings. He has to be stopped."

"What do you mean, stopped? Are you a cop?"

"I am a cop, but not the kind of cop that you might think."

"What do you--"

A howl pierced the night, silencing her. I did not know exactly where the howl had come from, but I knew *what* it had come from, and I knew it was not far away.

I gripped Stacy's shoulder. "If you like me as much as I like you, you'll tell me everything. No more secrets, Stacy."

Her eyes were wary. "But he's coming, Nathan. Do you have any idea what he'll do if he finds you here?"

"I'll take the risk. I have to know the whole story."

She slumped on the couch. Stared at her lap.

I pulled over a rocking chair, sat across from her.

"I'm waiting," I said, rocking back and forth. I was trying like hell to convince her that I wasn't afraid.

She said, "Eight years ago, on a family vacation in Arizona, my mother was killed." She paused and looked at me, as though checking to see whether I believed her. I said nothing, only nodded. She continued: "My dad and I found her body. It was torn to pieces. Before we could even think about what to do, me and my father were attacked, too. But we weren't killed. We were bitten and turned into . . . well, you know what we became, don't you, Nathan?"

"Yes," I said.

"What happened to my mom scarred both me and my father pretty deeply, but my father's pain is more obvious. He became obsessed with protecting me, with making sure that I never ended up like my mom. Pretty foolish for him to worry about that, considering the abilities I have, but in his mind I'm just daddy's little girl, like I've always been."

"Go on," I said.

"He's as obsessed with protecting me as he is with making sure that I hook up with the right guy. I mean, the right guy, whoever he turns out to be, will have to become one of us. He'll have to become part of the family, in every way. That's why he's been giving you so much hell, Nathan. He doesn't think you're right for me, and he's trying to scare you off."

"Without resorting to killing me, I presume," I said. She winced.

"Terrel and David were sweet guys, " she said. "But they were much more aggressive than you are. Daddy didn't like that at all. He tried to make them leave me alone, but the harder he tried, the more pushy they became. Daddy had finally had enough. So he . . ."

"Slaughtered them," I said. "There are others, Stacy. I don't have photos, but I know that Mr. Payne had been busy 'protecting' you for at least the past five years. Over a dozen innocent guys have paid the price for being interested in you."

"He's not a killer, Nathan. Please don't make him sound like he's evil."

I touched her face. I felt bad for her. She was immersed in denial.

Another howl shattered the night. It was getting closer.

I glanced at the windows, at the shadows surrounding us. He would be there soon.

Stacy straightened. "How did you learn so much about us?"

"Word gets around," I said. "When someone has been as wild as your dad has been, others notice. I pursued a relationship with you because I was asked to learn the full story."

"You mean you dated me only to learn about my father?" she said. "You used me?"

"Hold on, don't get mad. Yes, I first wanted to date you to find out about Mr. Payne. But when it became obvious that we clicked so well, I started to fall for you."

She smiled a little. I could not return her smile. I was conscious of the howls. They were getting much closer.

"So who sent you to me?" she said. "What kind of police do you work for?"

I opened my mouth to tell her when an angry roar filled the air. A huge, dark shape hurtled like a torpedo through the living-room window, shattered glass flying everywhere.

The intruder landed in the far corner of the room, an area dense with shadows. I glimpsed a hairy, hunched form, like a big man on all fours, and I heard husky breathing issuing from the beast.

Stacy grabbed my hand. "Come on. If you want to live, we've gotta get to my room!"

We ran to the staircase. Behind us, the creature growled. I looked over my shoulder.

The animal had moved out of the shadows. In spite of the glossy coat of grey fur, the long snout, and the sharp, canine teeth, I recognized who it was. The eyes gave it away.

Mr. Payne. The werewolf.

"Hurry!" Stacy pulled me upstairs. We scrambled into her bedroom, then she slammed and locked the door.

"Do you want to be with me?" she said. Her eyes blazed.

"Be with you?"

She grasped my shoulders. "Do you want me to be with me? Forever?"

I stammered. "Stacy, I have to do something."

"What?"

I opened my jacket, revealing the gun holstered on my hip. I pulled the revolver out of its sheath.

Stacy retreated a few steps. "Please, put away that gun, Nathan."

"Sorry, but I'm only following orders." I grabbed the door knob and flung open the door.

"No!" she said.

Ignoring her, I moved to the staircase. Mr. Payne, the werewolf, bounded up the steps. The beast leaped over three and four risers at a time. It snarled, saliva flying in thick ropes, eyes aflame with inhuman rage and hunger.

My hands trembled. He was so *enormous*. If I missed, I was finished.

The werewolf sprang toward me.

I squeezed off one-two-three shots, the revolver booming like a cannon. One misfired round plowed through the railing; one smacked into the creature's chest; and the third drilled it between the eyes.

The beast shrieked. Leaking dark blood like a busted water hose, the werewolf rolled down the stairs. It crashed to the floor with an impact that reverberated through the house.

Then, silence. The creature lay on the floor unmoving. Dead.

I closed my eyes.

My assignment was accomplished. It wasn't handled in the neat, thoroughly documented manner that my superiors would have preferred, but they would accept my work. They would have to accept it. I was one of the few detectives in the world qualified to handle this kind of case. The scarcity of individuals in my position provided job security.

"You killed him," a guttural voice said from behind me.

It was Stacy. She crouched in the doorway. She had begun to metamorphose, too: pretty nose lengthening into a canine snout, claws pushing through the tips of her slender fingers, coarse hair covering her creamy skin . . .

"I had to kill him," I said. "Unchecked beasts like him make it more difficult for all of us. He was violating the code."

I thought I saw confusion on her rapidly transforming face.

I wanted to explain, so I said, "Our power lies in our secrecy. Your father was killing at will, and that isn't allowed. Kills have to be carefully planned and concealed, or else, the safety of our entire breed is threatened."

She dropped to the floor on all fours. She raised her long neck, stretched her jaws wide. Her thick tongue swept across her rows of sharp teeth.

She howled.

"I'm responsible for enforcing the rules for us," I said. I looked at the revolver in my hand. "According to the rules, I'm supposed to slay you, too. I'm not allowed to leave witnesses."

I studied Stacy's werewolf form. She regarded me with her dark eyes, panting softly, expectantly.

She was gorgeous.

I tossed aside the gun.

"But you know what?" I said. "I never follow all of the rules. There's a full moon tonight. And I don't know about you, but that tiny steak I ate earlier left me hungrier than ever . . ."

Nostalgia

You can leave home, but something might follow you . . .

I saw the house when I was driving home from work late one evening.

I had decided to try a different route from the office to my apartment, because in the five months that I'd been living in Atlanta, I'd been following the same paths to everywhere that I frequented: my job, the Winn-Dixie supermarket, the barber shop, the bank, the Blockbuster Video store, the bar-and-grill with the icy beer and the hot wings. I felt as though I were already working in a rut, like a dog that runs the same dusty trail back and forth across a yard. Five months ago, I had moved here from Illinois to experience something new. But unless I made the effort to see new things, the new would quickly become commonplace. Taking a different route home was one small but meaningful way that I demonstrated my commitment to experiencing a fresh perspective.

When I saw the house, however, I was reminded of the life that I had left behind in Illinois.

The house was located on a residential street named Common Avenue. Although the road ran parallel with a busy thoroughfare that handled most of the traffic in the area, the abundance of tall, leafy trees that lined the road enveloped the street in a tranquil oasis. Stylish contemporary homes with trimmed lawns and shiny autos parked in front of two-car garages sat on each lot. I saw children playing in yards; a young woman powerwalking across the sidewalk, her black Labrador trotting beside her; a man in a grey suit climbing out of a sedan, gripping a briefcase in

one hand, his other hand unloosening his tie, no doubt relieved to be home after a long day at work. In the middle of this tableau, perhaps halfway down the block, I noticed the house.

As though my foot had a life of its own, I stamped the brakes. I rocked to a halt. I stared.

I could not believe what I saw, but I could not argue with my own eyes.

Unlike the other homes on the avenue, which appeared as though they had been constructed within the past ten years, this house looked to be at least thirty years old. It was a Colonial model, painted eggshell white, with red shutters. A three-car garage painted the same colors was attached to the house.

It sat atop a slight hill; a wide, blacktopped driveway extended from the garage to the street. The grass was a bit too long, which was especially noticeable since the surrounding lawns were trimmed. A mature elm towered on the perimeter of the yard.

In every visible respect, the house was the same as the one in which I had lived for the past eight years: my grandmother's house. I had moved in with Grandma almost immediately after my grandfather had died, charged by my family with the responsibility of doing the "man's work" around the house, and, even more important, keeping Grandma safe.

Grandma would've had a fit if I had let the grass grow that long, I thought. Grandma had been a stickler for numerous things, but nothing rivaled her zeal for having the grass cut. It was something about her that I'd never understood.

Her voice came to my mind with such clarity she might have been speaking into my ear:
Lord, have mercy, we got the worst looking yard on the block. If you don't cut that grass, Rick, I'm gonna have to pay somebody to do it. You know I ain't got the money for that. I know you busy and all, but that grass-

I shook my head, clearing away those old mental cobwebs. I realized that I had halted the car in the middle of the street. I parked alongside the curb.

I turned back to the house. Although it was half-past seven and my stomach hungered for dinner, I would not be able to leave until I had taken a closer look.

I got out of the car and crossed the street. I stepped onto the sidewalk.

Who lives here? I wondered. Another widowed black grandmother and her grandson? Do Bible studies take place in the basement every Monday night? Is there a Doberman roving around the back yard, kept mainly because Grandma knows a dog will scare away thugs?

I did not see any people moving around in the house, and I did not hear a dog barking. There were no cars parked in the driveway, either. The only indication that someone lived there was a glowing porch light above a storm door that opened into a breezeway.

The light illuminated the numbers on the weathered black mailbox. 2118. 2118 Common Avenue.

A chill coursed through me. My grandmother's address was 2118. The name of her street was George Avenue, which was hardly similar to Common, but the match of numbers was eerie.

Well, so what? I thought. It's a coincidence. I had once heard a theory that every human being in the world had a person, somewhere, who looked exactly like him. Why not a house? There were probably several dozen homes across the country that looked identical to my grandmother's.

But down to the last detail of the landscaping? I wondered. That elm tree looks exactly like the one I used to climb when I was a kid. How could I explain that?

No ready answer came to mind. Slowly, I walked up the asphalt path that led to the front door, searching for a discrepancy, a detail that would differentiate it from Grandma's place.

As a child, I had spent many lazy summer afternoons playing on this walkway, capturing ants in jars, or riding my bike along it as if it were a motorcycle ramp. Other times, Grandma would emerge from the door and holler that it was time to eat, and my cousins and I would scramble up the path, racing one another to the dinner table.

No, it wasn't this walkway, I reminded myself. The one I remembered was in Illinois. But I'd be damned if I didn't see the same slight cracks, lines, and indentations in this pavement underneath me.

I shook my head. This was too incredible. I plodded forward, looking at the ground. I was searching for something. If I found it, I would--

"Oh, shit," I said aloud. I stopped and bent to my knees. Gaped at the sight below.

On the walkway, beside the garage, I saw the imprint of a child's shoe. It was embedded in the concrete, like some little kid's Walk of Fame.

A garage had been added to my grandparents' house when I was five years old. Shortly after the concrete foundation had been poured, while it was still soft, I had ventured into the area and dabbed my foot in it, ruining my shoe, but strangely proud that I had made my mark. The builders (who were actually friends of the family) never bothered to smooth over the imprint.

And here, several hundred miles away from that home in Illinois, was an identical footprint, in front of an identical garage, beside an identical house.

Heart pounding, I stood.

I did not understand what was happening, but I was compelled to find answers. I could not drive away and pretend that I had never seen this.

Because, two months ago, Grandma's house had burned to the ground. She had been inside, alone. She had died in the blaze. It was a freak accident, caused by her leaving on the gas

burner before she had went to bed--something that never would have happened if I had still been living there, because I had always checked the range before turning in for the night. It had been one of my self-imposed responsibilities.

And I have not slept well since.

* * *

I have nightmares perhaps three, four times a week. It is always the same haunting dream. I am on the sidewalk in front of Grandma's house, hugging her good-bye, because the day has finally arrived: I am moving away from home and to Atlanta, a city in which I have no friends and no family, only the promise of a new job and a new life. Stifling tears, I turn away from Grandma, take a step . . . and I am instantly upon an airplane that is standing on a runway, seconds before takeoff. Except the runway is the street that runs in front of Grandma's house. I sit in a passenger seat beside the window, and through the glass I see Grandma on the walkway, waving good-bye. Behind her, the house is on fire, flames and black smoke flapping against the pure blue sky. The airplane begins to roll forward, and still Grandma stands there, waving. I press myself to the glass as we rumble ahead, straining to keep Grandma in sight . . . and the last vision I have of Grandma is her walking into the burning house.

I always explode out of the dream with a scream bursting from my lips.

Shaking away a chill, I looked at the house before me. There was no fire, like there was in my dream. If it were not for that glowing porch light, I would have assumed that the home was vacant.

Someone lived here. I had to find out who.

I stepped toward the front door. A closed wooden door stood behind the storm door, so that you could not enter the breezeway without first getting through both barriers. At night, Grandma would lock every possible entryway. She worried constantly about break-ins. Sometimes, my cousins and I had jokingly called Grandma's house "The Fortress."

A doorbell was attached to the storm door frame. I pressed it.

If someone answered, I did not know what I would tell them. I hadn't bothered to think of a story that would explain my visit. Maybe I would tell them the truth.

Hello. Excuse me, but I had to see who lived here. My grandmother's house in Illinois looked exactly like yours. See, Grandma died in a fire that burned down the whole place, and I had to make sure that, you know, my Grandma wasn't actually alive and well and living here in Georgia. She never liked the thought of me being far away from her, if you know what I mean.

In spite of myself, I almost laughed out loud.

After a few seconds, no one had answered. I took a few steps back and gazed at the front windows, to see if anyone might be looking outdoors. I didn't see anyone peering through the venetian blinds. I did, however, notice bright purple petunias blooming in the long flower box beneath the window. The same kind of flowers that Grandma had tended devoutly.

There was coincidence, and then, on a higher level than coincidence, there was Strange Stuff. No doubt, this was Strange Stuff--something that utterly eluded a rational explanation.

I stepped to the doorway again, pressed the bell once more. No response.

I slid my hand to the door handle. Pulled. No luck. It was locked.

What would I have done if the door had opened, anyway? I thought. Walked inside? No matter how much this looks like Grandma's house, it was private property. Was I crazy?

Asking myself those questions brought my senses back to me. I didn't know these people who lived here. Whether they were home or not, what would they think of a stranger snooping around their yard? And what about the neighbors? I had probably already invited their suspicion. People tended to pay attention to unfamiliar men who stopped and approached houses in their neighborhood.

My curiosity was not satisfied, but it was time to leave.

I returned to the car.

Before I pulled away, I glanced at the front windows of the house. I saw a gap in the venetian blinds, as though someone were gazing through the glass.

I blinked, trying to see more clearly.

The blinds quickly fell back into place.

I frowned. Had I actually seen them parted, or had I been fooled by the summer twilight?

I peered at the windows. The blinds remained still.

I rubbed my eyes. They felt grainy. I had been staring at a computer monitor for over eight hours, and after such a long day, I couldn't rely upon my vision to see discern everything clearly, especially as night approached. Most likely, I had imagined the movement in the windows.

Nevertheless, as I drove home, I had the nagging feeling that I would be coming back to 2118 Common Avenue. Soon.

* * *

I had always been close to my mother. In the few months that I had been away from home, thanks to daily phone calls, my mother and I had grown closer than ever. I told her about

virtually everything in my new life. Seeing the strangely familiar house on Common Avenue was no exception.

I was also counting on Mom to give me some insight. The house fell into the category of Strange Stuff, and Mom had become a self-taught expert on Strange Stuff: ESP, psychic predictions, astrology, tarot cards, guardian angels, ghosts, haunted houses. She learned what she knew from books, the Internet--and most of all, she insisted, personal experience. Her deep interest in the occult seemed odd to me, but harmless. My own interest was limited to horror flicks and the occasional Stephen King novel.

"Hey, Rick," Mom said, her voice perky as usual whenever I called. "How're you doing?"

"To be honest, I'm confused," I said. "I saw something on the way home that I can't explain."

A thoughtful pause. Then: "What was it?"

I told her everything about the house. Being able to relate the story to someone else relaxed me.

"Oh, yes, that's very strange," Mom said when I had finished. "Disturbing, too."

"How so?" I said.

"Don't play dumb, Rick," she said. "You know what I mean."

I did know what she meant. But I had been unwilling to raise the subject.

"I don't like to talk about what happened to Grandma," I said. "And I don't see how it has anything to do with what I saw today."

"The connection between the houses is obvious," she said. "But you're denying it."

"You've lost me," I said. "You've went way deep into this, and I'm still paddling around the surface. Enlighten me."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Rick?"

"I've never seen a ghost."

"But do you believe in them?"

"You think I saw a ghost, Mom? I saw a *house*. Ghosts haunt houses. Houses aren't ghosts, and houses don't haunt people."

"A ghost can be anything," she said. "A house, a car, a person. It depends upon why the ghost is conjured."

I sighed. "Where do you get this stuff from?"

"Maybe a ghost is summoned because its spirit needs to be released. Or maybe the ghost is conjured by a living person, who needs to release something from within himself. A person can invoke a ghost with his own subconscious feelings."

"You think I called up this house from the spirit world?" I said.

"You spent some of the most important years of your life in that house," she said. "You practically grew up there. And your Grandma was like your second mother. The house and the people who lived there are special to you."

"It's the same for you," I said. "But you haven't mentioned seeing the house appear again, out of nowhere, have you?"

"I'm not the one who moved away from home, Rick."

"I don't think something like this happens to everyone who moves away from home."

"Not everyone's grandmother dies in a fire three months after they move away from home. Admit it, honey. There are unique circumstances here."

"I still don't know what you're trying to say," I said, knowing that I was lying, knowing that Mom would sense my lie, but knowing that I had to lie because to be honest was too upsetting.

Every day, I tried to tell myself that I had not done anything wrong. After I moved to Atlanta, I had called Grandma at least twice a week, to check on her and make sure she was doing okay. It wasn't as if I had moved away and forgotten about her. I tried to use that argument to console myself, but it didn't help. Mom understood the true source of the problem.

She went on: "You blame yourself for what happened to Grandma, but you shouldn't. It was an accident. You couldn't be there to save her from everything. You have the right to move away, to go out on your own and build your own life. That's what being an adult is all about. No one blames you. You should stop blaming yourself."

"What does me blaming myself--and yeah, maybe sometimes I do--have to do with me seeing this house today?"

"You're going to have to make that connection yourself, Rick. I think you already understand. You only have to accept it."

"I hear what you're saying," I said. "But I don't buy it. Anyone who would conjure his own ghost--as if that's possible, anyway--belongs in an institution. That's like talking to the walls or something."

Mom chuckled. That was one thing I loved about her. She had strong beliefs, but she didn't take herself too seriously.

"Just think about it," she said. "Be honest with yourself. Don't walk away until you've faced the truth."

"There's no way I could walk away from this yet," I said. "Even though it's probably coincidence, I'm just too curious to lay it to rest."

"That's how it always starts," she said, with satisfaction, as though, in spite of my resistance to accepting her theory, I had proved an important point.

I hung up.

Although Mom thought I had witnessed a ghost, my take on the mystery was more straightforward. Yes, the house did have amazing--even incredible--similarities to the house I remembered. But once you got down to it, it had to be a regular house, with a flesh-and-blood person living there. All I needed to do was to find out the resident's identity, and I would be on my way to solving the puzzle.

I grabbed the Yellow Pages.

* * *

I had decided to call the Cobb County tax assessor's office. The identity of a property owner was a matter of public record. Within minutes, I should be able to learn who owned the residence at 2118 Common Avenue. Then, armed with a name, I could plunge into a more detailed investigation, if I so desired. I just needed to know, more than anything, that a real, living person owned the house.

I punched in the phone number. After the third ring, a recorded voice spoke: "Thank you for calling the Cobb County Tax Assessor's Office. Our offices are now closed. Normal business hours are--"

Cursing softly, I hung up. Of course, the office was closed. It was past eight o'clock in the evening.

I'll call them tomorrow morning, I thought. It's not a big deal, anyway. I only want to satisfy my curiosity.

Then I asked myself: why should I bother to inquire about the house at all? Did it really matter? I didn't live there. I lived in this apartment, and Grandma, of course, didn't live anywhere on this earth any more. Why stir up painful memories for the sake of satisfying my curiosity?

My stomach growled. Glad to be distracted from my thoughts about the strange house, I went into the kitchen and grabbed a frozen pizza from the refrigerator.

While the pizza baked in the oven, I unwrapped that day's newspaper and sat at the dinette table to read. But the paper might as well have been written in Sanskrit. I could not concentrate.

In my mind's eye, I kept seeing the front windows of that house, venetian blinds parted, and someone watching me through the slats.

No, I imagined that. It was getting dark, and I couldn't see clearly. It's all in my head.

I desperately wanted to believe the voice of doubt. I wanted to chalk up the entire experience--the spectacle in the window, the house itself--to imagination. But another part of me, maybe my conscience, that part of me that compels me to be truthful, would not let me swallow those self-comforting lies. The truth was a big, throat-busting pill, and I was going to have to swallow it.

Someone was in the window watching me. But who? A ghost?

Could the entire house be a ghost, as Mom believed? Summoned by some mysterious power, for some equally mysterious purpose?

Was I going nuts?

Suddenly, the phone rang.

On the second ring, I picked it up.

* * *

"Hello?" I said.

No response. Soft static crackled from the handset, as if it were a long distance call with a bad connection.

"Hello?" I said. "Is anyone there?"

Amidst the static, I detected a voice; it was barely more than a whisper, too soft for me to identify the caller by name or gender.

"Hello?"

The static ceased. Silence as thick as syrup seeped from the phone.

"Is anyone there?" I said. By then, in a normal situation, I would have hung up. But so much weird stuff had been happening that it was easy to believe a simple phone call might be another piece of this unfolding mystery.

Another noise. Struggling to hear, I pressed the handset to my ear so tightly that the plastic felt fused to my eardrum.

I heard voices in the background, faintly. There was something familiar about them . . .

I closed my eyes. Listened.

The voices grew louder. When I recognized the identities of the people speaking, my eyes snapped open.

I heard myself. And Grandma. Having a conversation we'd had only a week before I moved away from home.

It was impossible, but I was not imagining this, and I was not dreaming. It was as real as any discussion I'd ever overheard on a telephone.

The ghostly voices floated from the handset:

I don't understand why you gotta leave home, Rick. Your family is here, all your friends are here. You go down to Atlanta, and you're gonna be all alone.

I'm sick of living here, Grandma. I don't want to be like everyone else. Born here, live here, die here. I want to experience something new.

That's what vacations are for. Travel somewhere new for a little while, then come home. You don't have to move.

Yes, I do have to move. There's nothing here for me any more.

Your family is here. Ain't that enough?

That's what vacations are for. After I move to Atlanta, I'm going to come back to visit sometimes, Grandma. And I'll call.

You're gonna get down there and forget all about us.

Come on. You know I won't do that.

Atlanta ain't a perfect place, Rick. Don't go there thinking everything is gonna be perfect.

I don't expect it to be perfect. No city is perfect. But I'll enjoy it.

You're deserting me. What am I gonna do without you?

You've got the rest of the family here. You won't be alone.

Do you know that I've never lived by myself?

Yeah, I know.

I can't live in this big house all alone.

Maybe you'll find someone to move in with you.

Oh sure, maybe I should get married again, right?

A chuckle. Then: If you want to, Grandma.

I'm just kidding, boy. Any man I'd marry at my age is likely to die before I do.

Well, you know that women usually live longer than men.

I've never lived alone. What if something happens to me?

Nothing is going to happen to you, Grandma. Everyone in the family's going to be here for you. You'll be fine . . .

The voices faded into silence. Static crackled over the line again. Then, the connection was broken.

I blinked. My vision was blurry with tears. I wiped my eyes furiously.

What in the hell was happening? Had I really unleashed something in the spirit world, just to haunt myself? To torture myself with guilt?

I slammed the phone onto the table.

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Grandma," I said aloud, mimicking myself. "You'll be fine."

Regardless of her theories about ghosts, Mom was right about one thing: I was in denial. The truth was, I did blame myself for the fire that had consumed Grandma's life. If I hadn't been so stubborn, so goddamn set on living my own life and moving a thousand miles away from home, if I had just stayed home with her, the fire never would have happened, she would still be alive. It was my fault.

I might as well have twisted on the gas burner myself.

I cradled my head in my arms. My skull pounded like a giant bass drum.

My eyes were closed, but I kept seeing the images from my nightmare, in brilliant color: Grandma waving at me, then turning to walk into the blazing house.

Nothing is going to happen to you, Grandma. You'll be fine.

Before I realized what I was doing, I bolted upright, grabbed my car keys, and slammed out of the apartment. Raced to my car. Gunned the engine. Roared out of the parking lot.

Halfway there, I admitted to myself where I was going.

I was going back to that house on Common Avenue.

Going home.

* * *

I pulled into the driveway of the residence at 2118 Common Avenue. I parked in front of the garage.

I'm home. No matter how far away I move, this will always be home.

A fuzzy sense of unreality held sway over me. I remembered the time that I had been playing football with some kids in the neighborhood: I had been running through the grass with the ball, and practically the whole team tackled me and piled on top of me. Mashed the breath out of me, cut off the oxygen flow to my brain for a bit. Mr. Jackson, who lived next door to Grandma, came and untangled us, and I had walked around in a daze for at least an hour, my body on autopilot.

I felt like that right now. My body was on cruise control. I was simply along for the ride.

I climbed out of the car.

Night had fallen over the city. Porchlights shone outside most of the surrounding houses, and warm, golden light suffused their windows.

This time, the storm door that led to the breezeway was unlocked. I pulled it open.

The breezeway was dimly lit. A short flight of wooden stairs led to the house. Another door led to the back yard; that door yawned open, barred only with a screen door. I looked through it and saw our dog, Cleo, a Doberman, watching me. Her nubby tail wagged, her sable eyes glimmering in the darkness.

"Hey, girl, how're you doing?" I said.

She leaped and placed her forepaws on the screen. She pressed her nose to the glass.

I waved at her. I climbed the steps to the inner door.

This door would be locked. Grandma always kept this lock engaged.

I found the familiar, shiny gold key in my pocket.

I turned the key in the lock. I pushed open the door.

When I stepped through the doorway and into the kitchen, smoke engulfed me.

* * *

Acrid, black smoke seared my nostrils and eyes, snapping me out of my nostalgic daze and into alertness. Coughing, I dropped to the floor and covered my mouth.

The stove stood in front of me, barely visible in the twisting haze. I glimpsed a cast-iron skillet sitting on a sputtering burner, a skillet that Grandma had used for thirty years. Flames and smoke poured from the pan as if it were the opening to Hell.

The fire. This is the fire that killed Grandma. And I'm in it. Oh, shit.

I didn't think about running out of the house. Grandma was in here. This was my chance to save her. To redeem myself.

Finally, everything made sense.

The blaze had started in the skillet, but I didn't know how to fight it. You couldn't throw water on a grease fire; it would only feed the flames, and even if it could work, the fire had grown too powerful for that approach to be effective.

My only choice was to get Grandma out of the house. I had time. The fire had not yet advanced past the kitchen.

On all fours, keeping close to the floor, I scrambled out of the kitchen and into the carpeted hallway. Thick waves of smoke rolled into the hall and into the living room ahead of me, but nothing in there had caught fire.

Heart hammering, I dashed down the hall to Grandma's bedroom. The door was closed. I rammed it open with my elbow and exploded into the room.

In the warm darkness, I saw Grandma, nestled under bedsheets. Pungent fumes laced the air.

"Grandma, wake up!" I ran to the bed. "Wake up! There's a fire!"

"Huh?" Her voice was groggy; the bedsprings creaked as she rolled over. "What you say, boy?"

"The house is on fire!" I clutched her arm. "We've gotta get out of here!"

She coughed--a sharp, body-wracking cough that I could feel in my own bones. For perhaps the past five years, Grandma had been plagued by coughs that seemed to flare up as soon as the sun went down. I had grown so accustomed to hearing them as I dozed off to sleep that they had become as commonplace as a cricket's nocturnal whine.

But these coughs were spurred by the quickly spreading smoke. My own lungs had begun to burn. I dropped to my knees. Grandma and I were face-to-face.

"Oh, Lord," she said. "Fire. The smoke. Oh, Lord, help us."

"We're going to make it out of here." The smoke had brought tears to my eyes; I wiped my eyes with my shirt. "Come on. We're running out of time."

She coughed. "Can't breathe . . . can't walk." Hacking coughs punished her body.

I grabbed her arm and slung it over my shoulder. She slid out of the bed, much of her weight upon me. Under ordinary circumstances, my knees would have buckled, but adrenaline had endowed me with inhuman strength.

With my free hand, I snatched the bedsheet off the mattress and covered our heads with it, hoping it would give us some protection from the deadly fumes.

Like a sober friend carrying a drunken buddy home from a party, we shambled toward the bedroom door. In spite of the sheet, smoke scoured my eyes, nose, and throat. I began to feel light-headed. As if from a distance, I heard Grandma coughing.

The smoke's gonna kill us, I thought. I dropped to the floor, pulling her down with me. We crawled out the bedroom and into the hallway. I lifted the sheet higher to see what was ahead of us.

The flames had spread to the living room and the end of the hall. Furniture that I had grown up with--sofas, chairs, end tables, lamps--blackened like roasted marshmallows in the all-consuming fire. A rancid stench filled the air, and the heat squeezed every ounce of sweat out of me.

We could not go any farther down the hallway without risking our lives. We had to find another way.

Beside me, Grandma whispered. I glanced at her. Her face was tortured, and her lips moved ceaselessly. I realized that she was praying.

"We're going to make it out alive," I said to her, perhaps attempting to convince myself.

"We're not gonna die in here, we'll find another way out."

She continued her prayers, whispering with such intensity that I doubted she had heard me.

A dancing wall of flames slowly advanced toward us. Behind the fiery blockade, objects crashed, sputtered, exploded.

"Let's go back to the bedroom!" I said. "We can climb out through the window!"

Grandma shook her head.

I tried to pull her backward, toward the bedroom. She would not move.

"Let's go!" I said. "To the bedroom! Come on!"

"You go, Rick," she said. She gasped, coughed. "Leave me here."

"What? No!"

"You can't save me, baby," she said, her voice paper-thin. "You've been good to me, a fine man, like a son. But you've got to go on now. My time has come. Please, leave me here."

I shook my head fervently. "But I'm supposed to save you."

"No, no, sugar," she said. "You're supposed to leave me here and go on with your life."

Like a swift bird, the meaning of the words that she had spoken flitted through my thoughts, but, distracted by my growing fear of a fiery doom, I could not focus upon her message.

"No way," I said. "You're coming with me if I have to carry you." I reached to get a better hold on her.

As if by spontaneous combustion, Grandma burst into flames. Her face split open like some kind of bizarre, fiery flower, skin charring, lips peeling back to reveal disintegrating teeth, eyes sinking into her blackening skull. Her arm that I had clutched ignited like a piece of dry wood, fingers curling up, shriveling, bones popping.

I screamed. Let her go. Then reached for her. But there was nothing left of her to grab. Hungry flames devoured her body as if she had been made of straw.

I howled. I had been given a second chance to save her. And I had failed.

The bedsheet on top of us had caught fire, too. Frantic, I cast it off into the flames that had consumed Grandma.

Those flames that attacked Grandma had erupted from nowhere, I thought vaguely. As if she were destined to die here. As if I were meant to learn that nothing I could have done would have saved her.

The meaning of everything that I had witnessed hit me like a jackhammer. Anguished by the hard truth, I felt a sudden urge to throw myself into the inferno, to give up and perish with Grandma and this house that held so many memories. But I couldn't. An invisible force seemed to hold me back and drive me to save myself.

I scrambled into the nearest room. My old bedroom. A double-bed, a dresser, a nightstand, not much else. I didn't stop to examine anything. I flung open the only window in the room and stuck my head out through the gap.

It was about a twenty-foot plunge to the grass below. The height of the drop mattered little. I would have taken my chances with a fifty-foot fall rather than accept dying in the blaze.

I climbed onto the window sill, focused my gaze on a soft-looking spot on the lawn, and drew a deep breath.

Then, I jumped.

* * *

I wasn't sure how long I was unconscious. When I awoke, I was lying on grass. Night still reigned.

I looked around. I saw that I was on the front lawn of the residence at 2118 Common Avenue; my car was parked in the driveway. But something was different.

It was not Grandma's house.

The address above the mailbox read 2118, but it was a completely different house. It was a beige, two-story, contemporary-style home that fit in well with the rest of the neighborhood. A wooden "For Sale" sign stood in the yard, creaking softly in the night breeze.

Staring, I got to my feet.

The house was dark, silent . . . and, obviously, vacant.

I took note of my clothes. They should have reeked of smoke. But they smelled as if they had been laundered yesterday, which, in fact, they had. I did not find any stains, or rips in the fabric.

Countless questions spun through my thoughts. But it was futile to ponder them, because few of the questions had answers. I knew only one thing for sure: I could not change the past. I could only accept it and move on. A tough and unsparing--but, ultimately--liberating truth.

Sighing, I walked to my car. I slid my hand into my pocket.

I pulled out the car keys--and found a shiny gold key that was unattached to the key ring. I recognized the key. For years, I had used it to unlock the door to Grandma's house. Before I had moved away, I had given it back to her.

Now, it had been given back to me.

"Thank you," I said. I pressed the key against my lips, softly. I dropped it into my pocket.

I would keep the key with me for the rest of my life, just as I would keep all my memories of Grandma--with no more guilt to plague my dreams.

I got in the car and drove away.

Afterword: Creating these stories

Of all the questions that writers hear, one of the most frequently asked is: where do you get your ideas? This can be a difficult question for me to answer. I honestly don't know where some of my ideas come from. Often, I use a personal experience as the launch pad for a story, but once an idea is airborne, anything can happen. I only try to follow the story to its natural conclusion.

Did that explanation make any sense? Probably not. So I'll give a little background on where I *think* these stories in this ebook were born.

-- "Dead to the World." When I was in my early twenties, I worked in customer service at a life insurance company. I answered a large number of calls from customers (we called them "insureds"), and some of these people could become irate when they believed they were getting jerked around. It was so bad that the employees in my department used to share customer service horror stories. I wanted to try my hand at writing the "ultimate" customer service horror tale. When I published this story in *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction* back in 1996, my co-workers were giddy. "This is exactly how we feel sometimes!" they said. I took some satisfaction in knowing that I had tapped into a realistic background--and given it a terrifying twist.

-- "Daddy's Little Girl." This story that didn't draw upon any particular experience of mine. Sometimes, a writer likes to create a tale for the sheer fun of it. I'd always wanted to write a story about werewolves, but the downside of writing about them is that so many stories about the beasts have already been written. You run the risk of your story sounding stale and unoriginal. To avoid that pitfall, I tried to play with the conventions a bit by making it blatantly obvious that Mr. Payne and his daughter were werewolves, and keeping the focus removed from Nathan, the hero--who turns out to be a special kind of werewolf himself. I wanted a twist ending here. Whether I succeeded is up to the reader.

-- "Nostalgia." This is easily the most personal of the three stories. Rick, the protagonist, is--I must admit it--a fictionalized version of myself. I moved away from Illinois after living with my grandmother for several years, having been charged by my family for taking care of things after my Granddad passed. When I relocated to Atlanta, it was a stressful experience for both myself and my grandmother. I wrestled with the guilt that I'd abandoned her for my own selfish reasons. Writing "Nostalgia" was therapeutic for me; it helped me handle the guilt. I think it wound up as an absorbing, original story, too. By the way, my real grandmother is alive and well.

Oh yes, you may have noticed that in all three stories, I adopted a first-person, male viewpoint. This really wasn't intentional. I just try to tell a story in the manner that fits best. I think it's sometimes hard for a male writer to write convincingly from the viewpoint of a female. Matter of fact, it would probably be easier if *all* of my stories were told through the eyes of a man. But I try to challenge myself. For an artist to grow, he must step outside his comfort zone, even at the risk of stumbling. Stay tuned!

An Excerpt from THUNDERLAND: A Novel of Suspense

A boy and his friends determined to solve a mystery.

A husband and wife determined to revive their marriage.

A mysterious stranger determined to destroy them all.

When thunder rolls, the terror begins!

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Chapter One

Even though Jason Brooks awoke from the most frightening nightmare in his life on that June morning, the horror really began afterward, when he entered the bathroom for the first time that day. Jason had experienced a couple of strange events in the past three months. But the incident in the bathroom marked the beginning of the mystery.

Curled up in fetal position, hands fisted, heart pounding, Jason awoke lying in the cool darkness underneath his bed. He blinked, disoriented. Shards of dream images gleamed in his mind like fragments of a shattered mirror. As he blinked a few more times, fully regaining consciousness, the images faded, vanished into the darkness that washed away all bad dreams. Gradually, his heartbeat subsided.

He became aware of his throbbing jaws. Rubbing his face with his hand, he opened and closed his mouth, relaxing the tense muscles. His teeth had been clenched, as if to bite back a scream.

Finally, he rested his head on the soft carpet.

It had been the nightmare again.

For the past few months, he'd had the dream at least once a week. Utterly terrifying, it always concluded in the same fashion: he awakened curled in a ball under the bed, heart hammering, hands squeezed into fists, and teeth clamped together. Frightened to the marrow.

He didn't understand the dream. He couldn't figure out whether it was a chilling vision of the future or just a twisted creation of his overactive imagination. He'd never mentioned the dream to anyone. Telling someone about the nightmare would make it more real; keeping it private made it easier to ignore--sometimes.

Ready to put the dream out of his thoughts and start his day, he began to squirm from underneath the bed. When he was halfway out, the bedroom door opened.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Mom said, poking her head inside. "What on earth are you doing under there?"

"Looking for my birthday presents." He pulled his legs out from under the bed, and got to his feet. "I didn't find any. Where did you hide them?"

Mom raised her eyebrows. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I'm serious."

"You were really under there looking for gifts?"

"Sure I was. Sometimes the best place to hide something is right under a person's nose. Like that old story about the letter. What was the name of it?"

" 'The Purloined Letter.' " Mom leaned against the doorway, arms crossed. "But something tells me this has nothing to do with birthday presents. I'm wondering if you were actually sleeping under the bed."

There was no way he was going to tell her about his nightmare. Sitting on the bed, he scratched his head, acting dumbfounded by her suggestion.

"Why would I do something like that, Mom?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I can't tell you anything. Because I didn't do it."

"I'm a mother, Jason. I do have a sixth sense for some things. I feel as if you're hiding something from me."

"I feel as if you're hiding something from me, too," he said. "My birthday presents."

Mom sighed. "Why are you being like this?"

"Being like what?"

"Secretive."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I told you the truth. Why don't you believe me?"

"I'm only concerned about you, Jason. Is it wrong for a mom to be worried about her son?"

"It is if she's only faking."

Mom ran her fingers through her short, curly hair. She frowned.

"Let's not go down that road, okay? I'm not in the mood to argue with you."

"Oh, I forgot. You won't be in the mood to argue until you get drunk."

"What are you saying? You know I don't drink anymore."

"It's just a temporary dry spell."

"No, it's permanent. I haven't had a drink since March."

"March was only three months ago. You've had three-month dry spells before."

"But this one is different. I'm not going to fall back into those old habits. I mean it."

"So what? You've meant it before, then went right back to being a drunk."

"I'm not denying that. I've made those mistakes plenty of times, and I'm ashamed to admit it.

But I've changed, honey. I have a new set of priorities."

"You're going to try a new brand of whiskey?"

"That's not funny."

He shrugged.

"My new priorities have nothing to do with boozing," Mom said. She pulled the swivel chair away from Jason's desk and sat in it, rotating so that she faced Jason. *"You're one of my new priorities. I want to be a good mother to you, because you're a good kid, and you deserve the best I*

can give you. Showing you that I love you is the most important thing in my life. With that as my goal, I can't afford to get drunk, ever again."

"How touching," Jason said. "Did you write that speech earlier, or did you make it up as you went along?"

"I don't expect you to come around overnight. I know you have a lot of bitterness. But everyone wants to be loved. You might hate me for how I treated you, but I still believe you want me to love you. You're not above those feelings, honey."

Jason looked away from his mother. Why had he let her get on this subject? Lately, Mom had been playing this "caring mother" role, talking to him as though she were interested in his life, cooking for him, buying him things, and doing a bunch of other crap that would supposedly convince him that she cared about him. She had begun this false act that past March, when he had been hospitalized for a head injury he'd sustained after he'd fallen out the tree in the backyard. According to her, watching him lie in a coma for three days had awakened her buried motherly instincts. When he woke from the coma, from the expression on her face, you'd think he had been resurrected. Ever since, she had treated him as if his birth had been predicted by prophets and celebrated by the court of heaven.

But she didn't faze him. It was all a bunch of bull. She was right to think that he wanted love, but she was wrong to assume that he wanted *her* love. She could tell him she loved him until her face turned purple, and she could kiss him on the forehead until her lips rotted off, but his memories of how she had abused him were so fresh in his mind that he wanted nothing from her except food, clothes, and a bed. The same basic necessities she had supplied when she hadn't given a damn about him.

"Everyone wants to be loved," Mom said. "Even you. Especially you."

Jason noticed the clock above the desk. "Look, Mom, it's nine o'clock. I should be getting dressed. I have a lot of things to do today."

Mom walked to the door. "Okay, I can accept rejection. I'm a big girl."

"Yeah, whatever." Jason rose. "I need to pee."

"Of course," Mom said. "It's time for me to go, anyway. I'm meeting your father at the restaurant."

"Tell him that his son said hello. That is, if he remembers his son."

Mom nodded. She usually declined to discuss his father's constant absence, maybe because it somehow reflected on her. Jason did not know. His parents' relationship puzzled him. Mostly because they did not seem to have a relationship.

Mom left the room. He heard the door downstairs slam shut. He stood at the window and watched her back her blue Nissan out of the garage, then drive away down the street.

He smiled.

At last, he was alone.

Needing to empty his full bladder, he hurried to the bathroom. He clicked on the light switch.

When he saw what was in there, he stopped. He gaped at the spectacle in front of him, his heart halting in midbeat, his body as motionless as a mannequin.

Slowly, he shut his eyes. Then he opened them.

It was still there.

The back of his neck grew cold and damp.

A large mirror covered the wall above the dual-sink vanity. Upon the glass surface, a word had been scrawled in red, in huge block letters:

REMEMBER

He stared at the word, breathless.

Remember.

Remember what?

As far as he knew, he had not forgotten anything.

With a trembling hand, he reached toward the mirror. He touched one of the letters, rubbed slightly.

The letter smeared. It had been written with a marker. He had actually expected blood.

But who had done this? Mom? The idea that she would do it seemed totally unbelievable. If she had wanted him to remember something, she would have told him, not have painted the word on a mirror. When she was sober, she was the most practical person he knew. And when she was drunk--and Jason knew that she had not drunk anything recently--she was obsessive about cleaning the house. She would have never desecrated her bathroom, under any circumstances.

The possibility that his father might have done it was even more unlikely. Dad rarely came home. Jason did not bother to consider him as a suspect.

So who was left? Who else had access to their bathroom?

No one Jason knew.

Then it must have been a stranger.

At the thought, a chill swept through him, sank into his bones.

Weird things had happened to him before. But nothing ever like this. He searched for a logical explanation, and he could not find one. It just didn't make sense.

Again, he stared at the mirror.

Remember.

Who had done this? When? And why?

Remember.

What was he being told to remember? Something? Or someone?

He gazed at the message longer.

The longer he looked at those blood-red letters, the less it seemed like a message. Instead, it began to seem like something else entirely. A warning.

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