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Table of Contents-

I. Bang- p.1

II. 12th and Tacoma- p.4

III. Light My Fire- p.10

IV. Puppet Theater- p.13

V. Excerpt from *The Spook Light*- p.16

All characters, places, and events are fictional. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Bang-

Bang... Bang... Bang...

The pounding echoes through the cabin; through Vincent's ears as he tries to ignore the pain radiating from the large, bloody gash on his left shoulder.

Bang... Bang...

"We have to get the bleeding under control," his wife says.

Mona goes in search of the first aid kit, while the blood continues to trickle down Vincent's arm. He moves his gaze to the window, praying silently to the moon,

Please let it be over soon.

"Monster," Mona mumbles, returning to his side.

"He's not a..."

Bang... Bang... Bang...

"Monster," Vincent finishes.

Bang... Bang...

The pounding becomes louder, more insistent. Mona douses a cloth with alcohol and raises a shaky hand to Vincent's wound.

"Yeah, well, let's just hope the door holds. If not..." Her words are drowned out by-

Bang... Bang... Bang...

Canned goods that had once lined the wall shelves fall to the floor, glass shatters as a jar of pickles crashes against hardwood, the door hinges scream as the being on the other

side grows bigger, stronger.

BANG... BANG... BANG...

Mona returns to cleaning his wound, while Vincent continues to stare out the window.

Just a little bit longer, he tells himself.

Sure enough, by the time Mona has finished dressing his arm, the moon begins to creep below the earth; the sky filling with a purple glow as the sun awakens from its slumber.

Bang... bang...

The pounding grows weaker, fading out until there is nothing more than a quiet-

Tap... Tap... Tap...

Vincent's gaze moves toward the door.

Is it over? Is it safe? He wonders.

"Go on then," Mona says, giving him a nudge.

Vincent walks to the door, careful not to step on the broken glass. He reaches a hand toward the doorknob, hesitating just a moment before touching its brassy surface. He turns the knob as one final-

Tap...

fills the room. He opens the door and blinks, adjusting his eyes to the oncoming sunlight.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," a tiny voice greets him. "I didn't know..."

Standing before Vincent is a small boy, tears of red streaming down the child's face.

The Gathering- 4

The hair covering the boy's body disappears; his eyes switch from pale yellow to a cool blue, and sharp fangs shrink as his body returns to normal.

Vincent slides a finger over the boy's cheek, wiping away the last of the bloody tears.

"It's all right, Son."

12th and Tacoma-

The last thing I expected after leaving my parents' house, an evening of printing out query letters for my latest children's book now behind me, was to see a white van. Not that I had never seen that particular kind of van before, but, when I noticed it out of the corner of my eye, I knew it was going to be a long night.

Although the entire scene happened in a matter of a few seconds, it felt as if I were watching an action sequence from a movie done in slow motion. First, there was a flash of white from the van, and then a motorcycle drove up onto the small sliver of a median at the intersection of 12th and Tacoma.

I watched in horror as the bike flew into the air, landing on its side and sliding across the lane toward where I was approaching in my car. Yellow sparks shown through the night like fireworks as the metal skidded across the pavement and, what I had initially thought must be some sort of acrobat, turned out to be a human body rolling directly onto my path.

How I even managed to put my foot on the brakes I will never know, but my eyes closed as I did so, my insides bracing for the *bump... bump...* as I drove over the body.

Amazingly enough, the *bump* did not come, but was replaced by another crashing noise. I opened my eyes to see another motorcycle slide onto its side, this passenger doing a stage dive straight onto the pavement below.

Something kicked in inside of me. Fear? Adrenaline? Nevertheless, my first thought

as I put the car in park and turned on my emergency signal was,

Crap. What if they ask for my license?

The thought continued to run through my brain as I opened the car door and walked two steps. That's all it took me to reach where the first body, a man in his late thirties I assumed, had finally stopped.

Shock was kicking in by now, and I gave very little thought to how swollen his tongue seemed to look as it protruded from his mouth. A thin line of blood trickled down from his lower lip, and a brief thought passed through my head,

He must have bitten his tongue, and then once again returned to, Should I leave before the police get here? What if they find out?

I heard a harsh gasp and looked down, taking in the entire scene for the first time. I felt like someone who had just awakened from a nightmare, only to realize that it was just a dream. Only...

"This is no dream," I muttered under my breath and resolved myself to stay with this person, at least until help arrived, no matter what the price would be to my own safety.

In a flurry, other people began to get out of their cars. The man on the ground started to take deep, constricted breaths and, when I made eye contact, I was sure he was going to die.

He must be dying. Why else would I be here?

His eyes, as blue as ice crystals, were rolled up into the back of his head. Unable to look at them for another moment, I lowered my gaze to his rasping chest. My stomach did a flip when I saw the gashes across his stomach. Still, they were nothing compared to those

haunting blue eyes.

Another man rushed to my side and sank to the ground. I could not see his face, but the smell of alcohol was so strong on him that I almost became intoxicated by it. He had a long ponytail going down his back and a Harley Davidson tattoo on his left arm.

“Do you have a cell phone?” I asked him as I pushed the fog from my brain. He didn’t seem to hear me, so I turned to the other people standing around, their bodies frozen with fear. “Does anyone have a cell phone?”

Ponytail placed something into my hand and, at first, I didn’t realize what it was.

“Oh shit. Oh shit,” Ponytail chanted as I forced my shaky fingers to dial 9-11. “Oh shit.”

“He’s going to be okay,” I said, although I didn’t really have a clue. I’m a writer, not a doctor. For all I knew, this guy could have been taking his final breath. “You’re all right, Buddy,” I said to the man on the ground, not sure he understood a word I was saying.

My eyes made their way down his body, surveying the damage as the phone in my hand continued to ring and ring. Buddy had a few small gashes on his arm to go along with those on his stomach. His faded denim jeans were completely ripped, revealing his genitals that, in the millisecond I took to view them, seemed fine. My cheeks flushed a bright red as I heard,

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” in a high-pitched voice.

The cell phone, I reminded myself. “Yes, there’s been an accident at Tacoma and 12th.” I heard someone else echoing my sentiments and looked up to see a robust girl on

another cell phone. “You got this?” I asked her.

I hung up before the robust woman could even nod her head, my eyes already returning to the task at hand. My head tilted to its side upon looking at the tangled mass that used to be Buddy’s right leg.

What the hell is going on? Why am I here if this guy’s going to live?

I set the phone down on the pavement next to Buddy and took the first step back toward my car.

“Someone, help me! I can’t find her pulse!”

Her pulse? My mind returned to the beginning, and I just then remembered the not so acrobatic body flying through the air.

I walked toward her, stopping in my tracks when I noticed she must be just about my age. A trail of blood flowed on the pavement, starting out small and widening as it led its way to her head.

Although her eyes were closed, I could see that she was very attractive. I said a silent prayer of thanks that I didn’t have to look into them. My fingertips reached out, and I steeled myself as I made contact with her still warm flesh. A slow *pulse... pulse...* worked its way through her neck, and into my skin.

“She has a pulse,” I said.

The sirens were coming in the distance, drawing quickly closer. Before I knew it, there were police cars and ambulances all around, the flashing blue and red lights blinding my eyes. EMTs appeared from every direction as I began to feel her pulse slowing, the answer to my earlier question surfacing. The girl who had shouted to me in a panic was

now babbling incoherently to a short policeman with a buzz cut, and I was momentarily left alone with the girl.

Well, it's now or never, I thought to myself. I knelt down closer to her body and whispered, "It's okay, Jessie. Your Mom is there... she's waiting." I felt a slight stir from the girl and moved my fingers down to grip her hand. The tears began to roll down my face. "It's going to be all right, Jessie. She's waiting. Go to her."

I closed my eyes as her hand took on a slight chill. I didn't need to touch her neck again to know she was dead. The buzz cut policeman approached,

"Ma'am, did you witness the accident?"

I should have said no, but nodded my head instead, my entire body numb with fear.

Shit! Why did I stay? I asked myself, although I already knew the answer. *I stayed because of her. Because, like it or not, someone needed me.*

"I'm going to need you to step over here and fill out a witness report. Can you do that?" He asked as the EMTs placed the girl on the stretcher and began to perform CPR.

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled before walking to the nearest squad car. He placed a pen and a piece of paper in front of me, and I started to fill out the pertinent information as if I had done this a hundred times before. *Hell, I have done this a hundred times before, maybe more.*

"I need to quit my day job," I said to myself, the last of my tears drying.

I scanned over the paper before signing a fake name at the bottom, and an idea crossed my mind, a thought that had slowly been eking its way through my brain ever since I started this job.

The Gathering- 10

“Maybe I should write about this. Who better to write about death than Death herself?”

Light My Fire-

You remember me, don't you? Best-selling author? I was the girl dubbed as the queen of horror; the girl who used to play drums in Stephen King's band.

That's not what I'm here to talk about, though. I'm here to tell you about *that* house.

See. My first novel was based on *that* house.

It was a gorgeous two-story Victorian with a fresh coat of white paint, pink shutters, and a rose garden that ran along the walkway. How could I resist?

True, it was a beautiful place, but even my first night's stay gave me the creeps. As time went on, the house became more and more frightening; maybe it was the smell of burning candles that would greet me each time I walked in the door; maybe it was waking in the middle of the night, feeling as if my entire body was on fire; maybe it was just my imagination.

Regardless, I was thrilled to get away from *that* house. Once I walked out that door, I never expected to go back.

But I did.

Two years later, I was shocked and amazed at the destruction before me. No longer a gorgeous Victorian house, but a charred mass of wood was all that was left.

Curiosity had taken over. I had to know why *that* house was now a destructed pile of rubble.

I found my way to the local police station, but no one was willing to help me. I may have been a famous writer, but it obviously meant nothing in a small town such as this.

I went to the library. When I asked the librarian, she looked at me as if I were crazy, and then turned to help someone else. I ventured to the microfiche reader and began my search.

Four hours later, I found it. A front page article dated two years earlier. My hands began to shake, and a chill ran up my spine, as I read the headline:

Promising author dies in house fire.

The memories flooded back; the aroma therapy candles I lit that night; falling asleep while writing my first novel; the smell of smoke.

I guess I never made the bestseller list, or became the queen of horror for that matter.

Nothing left to do except practice on my drums. Who knows, maybe someday I *will* get to play in Stephen King's band?

Puppet Theater-

I told them to go ahead. I told my husband I needed a cigarette.

In truth, the place terrified me.

The courtyard housed a variety of garden knickknacks: imps, gnomes, little green frogs with smiling faces. The head of a cherub, so child-like and innocent in appearance, sat before an opened cage.

I wonder what animal lives there? I thought.

I stood frozen at the threshold, staring numbly at the sign before me:

Puppet Theater.

A jingle rang through the air as I opened the door, and I was glad to be inside. My happiness was momentary, a darkened room and a musty smell greeting me. I gave my eyes a moment to adjust, and then scanned across rows upon rows of marionettes.

Thousands of eyes stared back at me; a court jester that looked more like a hunchback, a dragon bearing sharp fangs, a gypsy with a wide-spread grin.

A ripple of laughter echoed through the room, startling me

from my trance. I followed the source of the sound into another room, this one housing a small stage. Dozens of children sat huddled on the floor, hypnotized by the show.

"I wish I could have a child of my own," a wooden Gepetto was saying.

My eyes scanned the crowd, searching for the flaming red that was my son's hair. When I didn't see Michael among the other children, I looked for my husband.

"Where's Mikey?" I asked as I took a seat.

"He got to go backstage," my husband answered in a proud voice.

When the show was over, the lights came on. In the brightness of the room, I felt foolish for being afraid earlier. My husband and I waited by the stage, but Mikey never came out.

Finally, I approached a woman at the sales counter,

"Excuse me. I'm looking for..."

"I know," she replied, her eyes lighting up as they met my gaze.

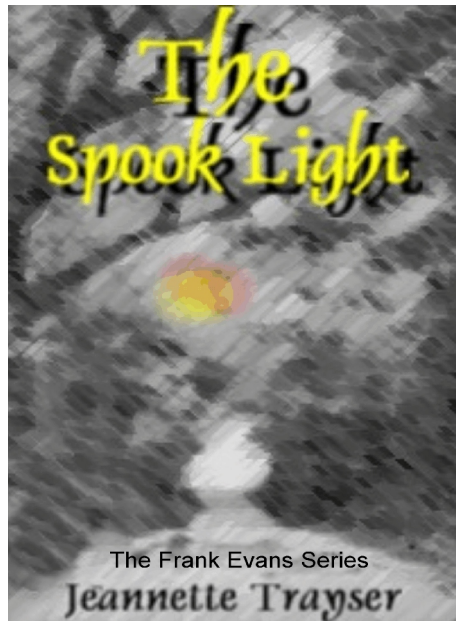
She brought a marionette out from underneath the counter. I took one look at it and fell in love. A patch of flaming red atop the wooden boy's head intoxicated me. Suddenly, I couldn't remember what it was that I had been looking for.

"Raggedy Andy," I whispered.

As my husband and I walked to our car, I felt like I was missing something. I stared at my marionette for a moment.

"You know, he kinda reminds me of someone."

The Gathering- 16



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The Gathering- 17

The Spook Light

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The Lovers-

“Close your eyes and try again,” he says. She throws him an icy glare.

“We’ve been doing this a hundred times over. It’s not going to work.” He meets her gaze, not about to back down.

“It will work. You just have to keep trying.”

“Geez...” she lets out a long sigh, “You sound like my mother.”

“Good. I bet you wouldn’t give up if she were here. Now, do it again.”

“Fine,” she snaps at him.

She clenches her hands into fists and grits her teeth in determination. A moment passes by, and then nothing happens. Her shoulders slump. She is not usually defeated so easy, but her patience is wearing thin.

“It’s not working. I told you so.”

“You can do this. Just keep trying.” He pauses to rub his forehead, tired and frustrated with her. A thought crosses his mind. “I bet Frank could do it.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. I said I bet Frank could do it.”

She does not respond to his words, but straightens her shoulders and closes her eyes.

“I think I can... I think I can...” she whispers under her breath.

Her image flickers once... twice... three times, and then she disappears.

“I knew you could,” he says with a smile.

Chapter 2-

“Fraaank... Fraaaank...”

Frank Evans rolls his 6'8" body over in the bed. He runs a hand through his balding red hair, trying to ignore the voice that has been haunting him for the past four hours.

Exhausted, he decides to give in to her and opens his eyes.

As he sits up, he sees the shadow of someone standing in front of him, a tall and thin silhouette where there should have been a closet door. He blinks a few times, adjusting his brown eyes to the darkness of the room.

“Fraaaank...” the shadow repeats.

I should have called her after the first hour, he scolds himself, although he knows why he hasn't. I would have sounded like an idiot:

“Hey. It’s Frank. I just wanted to see if you’ve been haunting my dreams? Call me sometime, Sis.”

“Katie?” he asks, wondering if he is awake or if this is a dream. He knows that it is impossible for her to be here. Even if she drove all the way from Oklahoma, there is no way she could be standing right there, in Denver, in his bedroom. “Katie, is that you?” He glances toward his bedroom door where the alarm is flashing a neon green. *I must be dreaming.*

“Fraaank...” the voice calls out once again.

He scoots further up in bed, one of the mattress’s metal coils poking through the fabric and hitting his leg as he moves. He retrieves his glasses from the night stand and, as he puts them on, the figure begins to crystallize. He sucks in a deep breath...

Impossible!

Standing right in front of him is his sister, Katie. Her curly strawberry-blonde hair is flowing just past her shoulders, floating around as if there were a fan blowing in front of her.

“K-K-Katie? How did you...?”

His eyes lower to see a dark colored liquid on her hands. He squints his eyes through his glasses, trying to get a better look. A part of him already knows that it has to be blood dripping from her fingertips.

Oh my God, not just her hands, Frank, he thinks in a panic, it’s on her shirt, her

jeans, everywhere.

Beyond her outstretched arms, the entire front of her is soaked with a deep red. Terror wells inside him.

“Katie... what’s wrong? What h-happened to you?”

She doesn’t reply, but her blue eyes begin to glow fiercely. Two beacons of light shine across the room and hit the wall behind him. Frank has always known his sister was special; dreaming about things before they happened, reading people’s thoughts, even swearing she could see ghosts.

But this?

He quickly reaches over and turns on his lamp, hoping to force himself awake. As the light pours into the room, Katie is still there. He closes his eyes, unable to look at her like this.

“This isn’t real... This isn’t real...” he repeats under his breath, willing the image to erase itself from his mind.

“Beware, Fraaank...” she says in a whisper, “Beware...”

“Beware of what?” Frank asks, opening his eyes and suddenly realizing that what is happening to him must be important. “Beware of what, Katie?” he asks again, the urgency in his voice rising.

She does not speak and, when he blinks, she is gone.

“To ask the hard question is simple.”

-W.H. Auden

“When the student is ready, the Master appears.”

-Buddhist Proverb

Chapter 3-

“You know the day destroys the night...”

Frank rolls over in the bed, still tired from last night’s escapade.

“Break on through... break on through...” Jim Morrison croons through the radio.

His restless night has left him sleep-deprived, and it takes him a few minutes to get out of bed. Images of his sister flash through his mind.

The blood dripping from her fingertips, Frankie. There was so much blood.

He resolves himself to call her as soon as he finishes his morning meditation. He walks to the corner of his bedroom and sits down on a deep blue mat, the material faded and worn from his many visits. He crosses his legs and places his left leg on his right thigh, repeating the process with his right leg as he begins to take the lotus position. He twists his neck around in a circle, trying to ease some of the tension in his shoulders, before pushing his posterior back, allowing some room for support.

His gut hangs down, but he ignores it, letting it droop as it wishes. He puts his head up, his chin in, and squints his eyes, not really focusing on anything in particular. Having completed this, he places his hands on his lap, forming what is known as the “cosmic mudra.” His left hand sits on top his right with the middle joints of his middle fingers together. His thumbs touch each other lightly, forming an oval shape.

Just as everything in the room begins to lose its shape and fade out, the phone rings. Normally he would let the machine get it, but not today. Today, he knows it is about Katie.

He walks into the living room, his heart pounding ruthlessly. His breath draws in

short, and the phone continues to ring, as he sidesteps into a tiny kitchen. He opens the first drawer he comes to and retrieves an inhaler. He inserts the tip of the inhaler, his only real weakness, into his mouth as he makes his way to the phone. He depresses the button and inhales slightly as he picks up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Frank, oh God, Frank...” His mother is on the other end, flustered and frantic.

Please tell me I’m wrong.

“It’s okay, Mom. Just calm down.”

“Oh, Frank,” she says through broken sobs, “it’s horrible.”

It was real. Somehow, last night was real.

“I know, Mom. I know.”

There is silence, followed by the sound of his mother blowing her nose. He closes his eyes, trying to prevent the tears from flowing.

Oh Geez, not Katie. It shouldn’t be like this... shouldn’t have been her. Not my little sister. Not the one with kids. “How?”

“There was a fire.”

Fire? That doesn’t make sense. If Katie had died in a fire, why was she bleeding so much?

“Please, Frank, will you call Wade? I don’t think I can... I don’t...” she trails off.

“No problem. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

He hangs up without saying goodbye and grabs his day-planner. As he runs down his schedule for the next week, the thoughts race through his mind;

You should have called her, Frank. You should have been there for her. What the hell happened to you, Katie?

After cancelling his last appointment, he turns the book to Wade's name. He sits with the phone in his hand, unable to do anything but stare at the numbers in front of him. Wade Maxwell, Frank's best friend since the age of nine, was the last person he wanted to call right now.

At thirty years-old, one year younger and two inches shorter than Frank, Wade was still blessed with a full head of blonde hair. Although he was a bit on the pudgy side, his emerald green eyes and great sense of humor made him popular with everyone.

What do I tell him? Frank asks himself before dialing Wade's number.

"Hello?" Wade answers in a hoarse voice.

"Hey, Wade, it's..."

"Is she okay, Frank?" Wade asks in a whisper.

"No," Frank replies. "How did you know something was wrong?"

"Just a dream... it was just a dream..." Wade trails off.

Overwhelmed by Wade's remark, Frank sits on the couch, giving in to an emotion he rarely shows, and lets his tears flow.

"Shit, Wade." Frank does not ask what dream his friend is talking about. *He must have seen the same Katie that I had the night before. Not the happy Katie that we both knew and loved, but the agonized Katie covered in blood.* "Mom says it was a fire, but it couldn't have been. All that blood... all that..." The words get stuck in Frank's throat. He wipes his face, forcing himself to breathe slowly. *In through the nose... out through the mouth.*

“It just doesn’t make any sense. Beware of what?” Wade asks.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” Frank replies.

Frank makes arrangements to stay with Wade while he is in Joplin and hangs up the phone. It takes him fifteen minutes to throw whatever he can into a couple of duffel bags before heading out the door and driving to Denver International Airport, better known as DIA.

At the airport, Frank wrestles with his tears once again. As he rides the subway to his terminal, he remembers how he and Katie had gone there when DIA first opened. They had ridden the subway just for the fun of it, never having been on one before. Katie had loved watching the little pinwheels twirl around on the tunnel wall as they sped past them.

“Not Katie,” Frank says to himself as he hands the stewardess his ticket. “Not my little sister,” he says as he takes his seat. *Shit. The kids.*

The last time Frank saw them, Paige had just celebrated her fourth birthday. Ethan, at two years old, was calling everyone, including him, Daddy.

Ever since Katie had married Mark Green, a short man with a very jealous nature, Frank hardly got to see her. During Frank’s last visit, he could tell that Mark was uncomfortable with his being there. He even got the feeling Katie was unhappy in her marriage.

As the years went by, something about Katie started to change. In physical appearance, she looked like the same old Katie, yet Frank sensed that something about her spirit had changed.

Changed into someone that I hardly knew, even though I tried.

Frank fastens his seatbelt as the plane prepares to take flight and wonders what to do for the next hour and a half. He brought his laptop with him in hopes of doing some work on his third novel, a story that follows the adventures of two mischievous elves who transport themselves into the modern day world.

Under the current circumstances, I probably wouldn't be able to get very far.

"Can I get you something to drink?" The flight attendant asks.

A short female that could pass for a Hobbit any day.

"Bourbon and coke no ice, please."

Although it has been four years since his last drink, Frank has the need for something today. When she, Martha the name tag states, returns with his drink, he empties the small glass within a matter of seconds. He closes his eyes and leans back in his seat, wishing that the trip home was under better conditions.

"Not Katie," he whispers under his breath.

He isn't sure if it is the alcohol in his system, or from seeing his sister in such a horrible state last night, but exhaustion bears down on him. His mind begins to grow fuzzy, and he finds himself drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 4-

“Hey, Frank,” she says.

Frank finds himself standing on a dusty gravel road lined with enormous trees. The branches lean all the way over the narrow road and, when he looks toward the sky, he cannot tell if it is night or day.

This place seems familiar to him. Although he could honestly be on any country road in Joplin, it is the energy here that sets the place apart from others; the ice cold feeling running through Frank’s veins, the smell of death filling his nostrils.

His knees tremble as his head turns in the direction of the voice to see his sister, Katie. This time, she looks as alive and well as when he last saw her. This time, the blood is gone. Her gray shirt and denim jeans bring out the blue in her eyes. Her strawberry-blonde hair rests calmly on her shoulders, making Frank’s throat go dry.

“Katie?” He manages to say her name before noticing the man standing next to her. Frank has never seen this dark-headed man before, but the stranger’s cool blue eyes seem familiar to him. *Where have I seen those eyes before?*

“I know. I know. His eyes are just like Jon’s.”

She could always read my mind. Katie was right, too. This man’s eyes were identical to her first husband’s.

“This is Jacob. We met at the house in Miami.” Frank’s gaze lowers as she speaks,

focusing in on their tightly woven hands. She laughs.

“I don’t understand, Katie. What’s going on?” Frank asks.

“Don’t be scared, Frankie. You’re just having a dream, that’s all. Jacob is here to help me. He’s my...” She looks into Jacob’s eyes and, for a moment, it is as if Frank were completely invisible. He clears his throat, trying to draw them out of their trance.

“Sorry.” Katie turns to her brother, “I’m not strong enough to visit you in any other way, so this will have to do for now.”

Frank notices that she did not bother elaborating on her relationship with this dark-headed man. As of yet, the man had not spoken a word, and his silence is unnerving.

“Wow, Sis, I guess I must have missed out on something these past few months.”
I’m not sure how comfortable I am with the fact that I’m talking to my dead sister. Dead? How can she look so real? So happy?

Frank tries to look at her again, but the image of Katie, the blood all over her body, flashes through his mind, and he must look away. Instead, he decides to take another look at his surroundings. *Not much to see except for the trees and the somewhat graveled road.*

“Where am I?” he asks.

“Well, in reality, you’re somewhere over Topeka, but, here...” Something in her voice draws Frank’s attention as her words falter.

Was that fear? Frank wonders.

“Here is a place that I need you to believe in.” Her expression is grave as she finishes, “If you don’t believe, Frankie, then you can’t save them.”

Frank looks down the road, his brain trying to make some sense out of what she is

saying. He sees a quick streak of light through the trees. *What was that?* He squints, trying to get a better look, but there is nothing. *No. Wait a minute. There it is again.* As he watches the small yellow ball of light change to green and split in two, he realizes where he is.

“Oh, Katie. You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Frank takes a few steps back, not wanting to believe in any of this. “You know this isn’t my kind of thing. I’ve never believed. How do you expect me to change my mind now?”

The pair of lights grow larger and begin to draw closer just as the images of Katie and Jacob flicker in and out. Katie reaches toward her brother, grabbing his arm. A searing heat runs through Frank’s body.

“You have to save my children, Frankie. For their sake, you have to believe.”

As she finishes, her body transforms into a light mist. Although Frank can barely make out her face, the heat continues to pulse through him. A brief moment passes by, and then she is gone. Frank sinks to the ground, putting his hands to his face,

“Not the Spook Light, Katie. Not the Spook Light.”

Chapter 5-

“Sir? Sir?” Frank’s eyes snap open. He expects to see Katie, but finds himself looking into the face of the flight attendant. “I’m sorry to wake you, sir, but we’ve landed.”

Seeing that Frank is all right, she turns to another passenger, an older gentleman, and begins to help him with his luggage.

“The Spook Light,” Frank mutters underneath his breath, grabbing his bags and making his way toward the exit.

Who the hell is Jacob? He asks himself, as he stops to use the restroom.

When he washes his hands, he notices the older gentleman from his flight standing at the sink next to him. The old man looks harmless enough, but something about him gives Frank a sense of déjà vu.

Must be nerves. Frank walks out of the bathroom with the feeling that he is being watched. As he leaves the terminal, he can’t help looking over his shoulder. ***Yes, there he is again. Why is this guy following me?***

Frank weaves through the crowd in an effort to lose the old man. The airport is stuffed to the gills with people flying in and out to visit family over the holidays. Despite the crowd, the older gentleman manages to keep pace with Frank and, in a matter of seconds, catches up.

“Don’t be afraid, Frank,” the man says as he grabs Frank. An instant electrical current flows through Frank’s arm and all the way out to the tips of his toes. The pulsating

sends him into a momentary state of paralysis.

“Who the hell are you?” Frank jerks his arm out of the man’s grasp and backs away. In Frank’s current state of confusion, he throws a punch before the older man even has a chance to answer. As his fist reaches the old man’s face, it goes right through. *As if the old man were made up of air.*

Frank sees a flash of blue in the man’s eyes, and then the man laughs. Frank’s blood boils with anger, and he is almost tempted to hit him again.

“I’m a friend of your sister’s. I think you were just wondering who I was in the bathroom,” the old man says.

A light bulb turns on inside Frank’s brain. He relaxes, although his anger is still there.

“Jacob?” Frank asks. Jacob nods his head up and down.

Great, Frank thinks to himself, just great. First, I see my dead sister the night she dies and, now, I’m standing in the airport having a conversation with her dead friend. Or is he her boyfriend?

“Oh, it’s not that bad, Frank. I’m sure you’ll like me once you get to know me better.” Jacob takes the bags from Frank and begins to walk away, looking over his shoulder when Frank does not follow. “Are you coming or not?” Frank glares.

Alive or dead, I don’t like how this guy is acting. Who the hell is he to show up and order me around? Frank thinks before catching up to Jacob and taking his bags back.

“You know Jon?” Frank asks.

Jon and Katie had been divorced for years, but Frank was still fond of him. Frank

remembers his mother saying something a couple of months ago about Jon dying of a heart-attack. Up to that point, Frank had always hoped that the two of them might get back together.

“Yeah, I know Jon. Why?”

“He wants his eyes back,” Frank answers, a sneer on his face. He walks toward the exit, leaving Jacob standing with his mouth wide open in shock. *Where did she find this clown? Frank wonders. Did she meet Jacob before, or after, she died? How is it that I couldn’t punch him, but he could grab me? And what about my bags?* The stream of questions grow and expound, making his head throb, and he barely notices the hulking man standing just outside the airport.

“Frank.” Wade pulls up the sleeve of his Navy blue shirt, and flexes his biceps. “I am Hans...”

Frank drops his bags and imitates Wade’s gesture, starting in on their favorite *Saturday Night Live* skit.

“And I am Frans...” Frank says, and then, in unison,

“And we are here to pump...” They clap their hands together, “you up.” A quick laugh from Wade, and then his face grows serious.

“Hear me now and believe me later, we’ve got some serious shit going on, Frank.” Wade looks around in search of something, “Where’s Jacob?”

“Not you, too,” Frank replies, picking up the bags and loading them into the small Ford Escort Wade rented. *I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised that Wade would see Jacob. After all, he saw Katie the night she died.* Frank closes the trunk, and then turns to

Wade. "I don't know where he's at. This is a little too weird for my taste to be honest."

Wade laughs.

"Are you kidding me? The guy pops up right next to me as I'm driving here. Just about wrecked the car." Wade walks over to his friend, and his voice lowers, "So... did you talk to Katie?"

"Yeah, I saw her." Frank leans against the car for support, the recent events bearing down on him like a lead weight. "She looked so good, didn't she? Almost..." Frank trails off, not sure if he can finish his sentence without breaking into tears.

"Alive?" replies a voice directly behind them. Frank spins around to see a scrawny teenage boy with dread-locks. When the boy smiles, there is a flash of blue in his eyes.

"What the hell? What happened to the old guy?" Frank asks, jumping back.

"He was just a temporary fix. I can't stay in one," Jacob pauses, searching for the right word, "host. I can't stay inside one host for very long or it could become a permanent residence."

"Permanent residence?" Frank asks, confused.

"He means that, if he stays inside one body for too long, his spirit would take over theirs," Wade says with a shrug, while Frank looks at his best friend with yet another shocked expression.

Geez, he seems quite cool about this whole thing, whereas I feel like I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Frank watches Wade walk around the car and get inside, Wade's hulking figure looking inappropriate behind the wheel of such a little car. Frank opens the passenger's

door and moves the seat all the way back before trying to squeeze his 6'8" body inside the cramped space. He turns to where Jacob had been standing, but the boy with the dreadlocks is gone.

"He does that a lot," Wade explains.

"You act like you're actually enjoying all of this," Frank says, a little too harsh.

Wade looks like a wounded animal as Frank tries to apologize, "Sorry, man. It's just a lot to handle right now."

"Yeah, I know, Frank. Believe me, I wish things weren't happening this way." He punches the steering wheel. An otherwise calm and laid-back guy, Wade's anger is visible. "It shouldn't have been Katie, Frank."

I should have been there. I should have known, Frank's initial thoughts play through his head again.

"No, it shouldn't have been Katie." Jacob echoes Wade's sentiments as he materializes in the backseat.

Frank looks over his shoulder, ready to say something smart, but the sad expression in Jacob's eyes stops him short. This time, Jacob is inside the body of an airline pilot.

"Won't he miss his flight?" Frank asks.

"No, he isn't due out for another hour. As far as he knows, he's taking a quick catnap in the employee lounge." A shiver runs up Frank's spine as Jacob speaks.

I don't think I'll ever be comfortable with having a chameleon ghost sitting next to me.

"Oh," Frank replies, and then an image flashes through his mind, an image of his little sister with blood dripping from her fingertips. "Katie didn't die in the fire, did she?"

“No, and yes,” Jacob answers as Wade pulls into traffic. “She was bleeding a lot. The blood was everywhere.” He turns to look out the window, his eyes glazing over. “I still think if I had gotten there sooner... if I had just stayed... maybe I could have saved her.” He says this so quietly that Frank almost doesn’t hear him. “Maybe...” He trails off, getting lost in his own thoughts. Wade and Frank exchange glances, and Frank is almost too afraid to ask the next question.

“You were there?”

“Yes, I was there.” Jacob’s face snaps back to face Frank as if he has just awakened from a daydream. “It was my fault, Frank. I should’ve never let them move into that house. I should’ve never left that day, even though she told me to.” He moves his gaze to the floor. “By the time I got there, it was too late. She was at the window with the kids. It wasn’t until after she threw Ethan down to Mark that I realized she wasn’t planning on leaving the house.” He looks at Frank and Wade, his eyes begging for understanding. “I swear I didn’t know what he’d done. I didn’t know she was hurt or I would have...”

“Wait a second.” Anger returns to Frank with a vengeance. “Who? Who did this to her?”

Jacob shakes his head back and forth, his body flickering in and out as he answers,

“My father,” and, with that, Jacob is gone.

“Shit,” Frank yells to no one in particular before turning to Wade. “Did you understand any of that?”

“Just one thing.” Wade raises an eyebrow. He looks Frank dead in the face, the anger transforming his emerald green eyes into a deep red. “Someone... or something, hurt

Katie and we're gonna find out who."

"And when we do find out..." Frank moves his shirt-sleeve up his arm and makes a fist. "We're going to..." He punches the dashboard as they say in unison,

"Pump... them up."

Chapter 6-

“Will they be able to do it?” she asks the dark-headed man next to her.

They sit in the bleachers, the roaring crowd around them unaware of their presence.

He watches as number 33, Larry Walker, strides up to the batters’ box.

“The Rockies?” She squeezes his hand, and he looks into her eyes. He clears his throat before answering. “Frank’s very stubborn, Katie.” He pauses, a mischievous grin appearing. “A lot like his sister.” She playfully punches him in the arm and laughs.

“I bet he can’t stand the idea of you tagging along with them.” Her laughter dies away as Walker swings at the first pitch. Strike one. “How do we get him there?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out,” he reassures her. She looks at him, giving his hand another tight squeeze.

“He has to believe, Jacob. He has to save the kids.” Her expression turns serious again as she turns back to the baseball game. “Bottom of the ninth, Frankie... bottom of the ninth...” she says as Walker knocks one out of the park.

If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?

- Dogen

“I am going to pose a question,” King Milinda said to Venerable Nagasena.

“Can you answer?”

Nagasena said, “Please ask your question.”

The king said, “I have already asked.”

Nagasena said, “I have already answered.”

The king said, “What did you answer?”

Nagasena said, “What did you ask?”

The king said, “I asked nothing.”

Nagasena said, “I answered nothing.”

- “Who’s on First” Zen

Chapter 7-

“Do you want to go to your parents’ house?” Wade asks, bringing Frank out of his thoughts.

As they pass the city limits of Joplin, the sun is beginning to set on what has felt like the longest day of Frank’s life. His stomach is growling, having only consumed the bourbon and coke today, and his head continues to pound incessantly.

“No, can we go to your place first? I want to clean up before I see my parents.”

Wade pulls onto exit 8b. They make their way through the heart of Joplin, driving by the numerous restaurants and hotels located directly off of junction I-44 and highway 71. Population slightly more than 40,000 people, Joplin is almost smack dab right in the middle of the United States.

Not exactly the smallest town, but certainly not the Denver I know and love so well, Frank thinks to himself. Not the Denver Katie loved.

“Did Katie ever say why she moved back to this area?” Frank asks Wade as they pass the Northpark Mall.

They head out of Joplin, driving toward Webb City where Wade owns a house. Wade’s brow wrinkles as he contemplates the question.

“Something about Mark getting a better job,” Wade answers.

The guilt washes over Frank again. *I shouldn’t have to ask these questions. I should have kept in touch with her more often.* He can remember a time in his life when he and

Katie were practically inseparable; they both worked at the same restaurant when she first moved to Denver, they lived in the same small apartment on Logan Street, they hung around with all of the same people. *What happened to us?*

“Mark happened, “ Frank says to himself without realizing he is speaking aloud.

“What was that?” Wade asks.

“Nothing.” Frank looks out the window, not sure if he wants to face Wade, or anyone else, right now. He sees what used to be the Webb City drive-in, another place that brings back a flood of memories. “I was just thinking that, before Mark came along, Katie and I had been a lot closer.”

“That’s what happens when people get married, Frank,” Wade replies, although his voice doesn’t sound very convincing.

“You know that isn’t true. When Katie and Jon were married, the four of us were together all the time.”

“Yeah, well... Jon and Mark are two totally different stories,” Wade says quietly. Frank looks over, watching his friend’s face as Wade continues. “Mark just wasn’t really one of us. To be honest, I don’t even think he likes me.”

“Don’t you mean that you don’t like Mark?”

“Hell, no,” Wade says with a laugh. “I can’t stand Mark, but I’ve always been cool around him. I even took him out drinking one night when they first moved here.” Now, it is Frank’s turn to laugh as he recalls the story.

“That was the night he threw up all over the bathroom at Denny’s, isn’t it?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault.” Wade shrugs his shoulders as he pulls into the driveway.

“He couldn’t hold his liquor. If he was that drunk, he should’ve stopped drinking.” He smiles at Frank, trying to play it off, although his words are serious, “Mark just isn’t Jon. He never was and he never will be.”

They get out of the car and walk to the front door of a ranch style house Wade had bought the previous year. Part of Frank had always hoped Wade would decide to move back to Denver someday, but, after his friend bought this place, Frank gave up on the idea.

Wade opens the door, and Frank’s nose is instantly assailed by the odor of dirty socks. Empty beer bottles are strewn about the disorganized living room and a PlayStation sits in front of the TV.

“Been playing Final Fantasy?” Frank asks. *The three of us used to stay up all night playing that game.* “I wonder if Katie was playing it.”

Frank sinks into the green leather couch, the same couch Wade had during their college years. Wade walks into the kitchen, retrieving two Fat Tires, a beer micro brewed in Fort Collins, Colorado, before taking a seat next to Frank. When Wade offers Frank a bottle, he takes it without hesitation. Frank takes a long drink, basking in its cold, bittersweet taste before saying,

“Shit.”

“Shit,” Wade echoes the sentiment, finishing his beer in a few gulps..

“Can I use your shower?” Frank asks, hopping up quickly before he falls asleep.

“Sure,” Wade answers, still frozen in his spot on the couch.

Frank grabs some clothes, a pair of faded jeans and a red polo shirt, out of one of his bags. He begins to walk toward the bathroom, turning to Wade with a final question,

“Do you believe?”

“No,” Wade replies, his face wincing in pain. “But we’ve gotta try.”

Frank turns the water to a scalding hot and stands in the shower, wishing that the liquid stream would wash everything away, wishing he could wake up and start this day over. He quickly rinses out his hair, knowing his parents are probably getting worried about him by now. His thoughts turn to how they must be feeling, how Mark and the kids must be feeling, and his heart sinks.

Well, at least the kids still have their father, he thinks to himself as he turns the water off.

After getting dressed, Wade and Frank slowly make their way back to the car, neither one eager to get to his parents’ house. They drive in silence until they pass the outskirts of Joplin.

“Where do you think Jacob’s at?” Wade asks. Although completely exhausted, Frank manages to find some anger left.

“Who cares? If you ask me, Jacob’s a real pain in the ass.”

“Oh, c’mon, Frank. Jacob isn’t that bad,” Wade replies.

“Well, he certainly isn’t Jon, even if he has Jon’s eyes,” Frank says, not willing to give in.

Honestly, it isn’t Jacob that bothers Frank, but his sister; he is angry at her for dying, for not calling him when she needed help the most.

I should have been there for her. Besides, I still don’t have a clue who Jacob was and what he, or his father, had to do with Katie’s death. For all I know, Jacob killed her.

“Naw, Frankie, Jacob didn’t kill her.” A voice answers from the back seat.

Wade and Frank turn, expecting to see Jacob. Wade’s face turns an ash white, and he swerves off the road. He regains enough composure to slow the car and put it into park, while Frank continues to stare at the person in the back with utter disbelief.

“I am flattered by your loyalty, though,” he says.

“Jon,” Wade whispers, his eyes blinking furiously.

“Hey, Sparky, what’s happening?” Jon asks.

Frank is unable to reply, his mouth still frozen in silence and shock. Jon looks different to Frank, looks older. There are the same signs of wrinkles on Jon’s forehead that Frank sees in the mirror each morning, and his once bushy black hair is slightly thinning.

Even as a ghost, the clothes are classic Jon; a black silk shirt, khaki slacks, a cool look that only Jon could pull off.

One thing hasn’t changed. The cool blue eyes staring at me are as radiant as ever.

“Of course I look older. It’s only been what? Five years?” Jon asks.

He’s right, Frank thinks to himself, it has been awhile since I last saw him, but, more than anything, it is the fact that he looks so real. It is one thing to see Jacob in his many bodies. Jacob is a stranger, but Jon, the Jon that I hung around with for all those years? No. That’s just too much.

“W-w-What are you doing here?” Wade stammers.

“Just thought I would drop by and say hello. Jacob’s a little busy, so he asked me to clue you in on a few things,” the ghost replies.

“I don’t understand. How do you know Jacob? What does he have to do with

Katie?” Frank fires the questions at Jon.

“One thing at a time, Frankie. Before I tell you anything, you’ve both gotta promise me something.” A familiar gleam appears in Jon’s eyes as he speaks, and Frank knows he is not going to like what the ghost says next.

“Okay, what?” Wade asks.

“You have to go to the Spook Light tonight.”

Not that again, Frank thinks to himself, letting out a groan. Wade pokes Frank in the arm.

“We’ll be there. Won’t we, Frank?” Wade looks at Frank expectantly, his emerald green eyes boring into Frank. *C’mon, Frankie. Gotta move. Gotta groove.*

“Fine. Fine,” Frank answers. “We’ll be there. Now, tell me how you know Jacob.” Jon sits back in the seat, a smile of relief showing on his face as he says,

“I met Jacob at the house in Miami. He was Katie’s landlord.”

“So you were at the house in Miami, too?” Wade asks. His mind swims as he tries to make sense of everything. *Jacob knows Jon. Katie knows Jacob. As for me, I still haven’t learned squat.*

“Yeah,” Jon replies, “After I had my heart-attack, I visited Katie once in awhile. I even met the kids a couple of times, although I wouldn’t mention that to Mark if you happen to see him. He wasn’t exactly thrilled that Katie and I were talking.”

“Oh... well,” Wade snorts, “I wonder why?” The three of them share a laugh, and then Jon grows serious.

“Look, Frank, I’m sorry. I wish I could have gotten there sooner. I tried to wake her

when I realized what was going on.” Jon looks at them with tears in his eyes. “You know I loved your sister. I would have done anything to stop...” he pauses, his blue eyes growing sharp and intense, almost looking like a pair of ice crystals, “Bastard.”

“Who? Jacob’s father?” Frank asks, reaching out to grab Jon, only to have his hands go right through the ghost.

“Yes, and no. It was Jacob’s father, only he was inside someone else.” Jon lowers his voice to a whisper. “He was inside Mark.”

“What?!” Wade and Frank say in unison.

“Confusing, isn’t it?”

“Mark killed my sister...” Frank rolls the words over his tongue, soaking in the enormity of the situation. *Katie was killed by her own husband and the father of their two children. Unbelievable.* “He can’t possibly keep the kids after doing that.” He turns to Wade, searching for some sort of answer, “Can he?” Wade looks at him with a guilty expression, and he knows his friend is hiding something. “What? What is it?”

“I didn’t want to say anything before, but Mark’s in Nevada.”

Wade says Nevada like “Nuh-vay-duh,” making reference to the city in Missouri, not the State located in the western United States. More important, the city of Nevada, located about an hour north of Joplin, is home to one of the State’s biggest Mental Institutions.

“Mark’s in Nevada?” Frank moves his gaze between the other two. “Dammit. Why am I the last one to know about everything?”

“Sorry, man.” Wade stares at the floor. “I just figured you already had enough on

your mind without this. I didn't realize he was there because he had hurt Katie. I thought he was there because she died."

Frank takes a few breaths before glancing at his watch: 6:00 p.m. *Shit, gotta get to my parents' house.* "Are you coming with us?" he asks Jon, hoping the ghost will say yes. *I need all the support I can get.*

"No, Frankie, I gotta get back. I shouldn't even be here right now, but Katie asked. Just do me a favor will ya?"

"What's that?" Frank asks.

"Don't give Jacob too much shit, okay?" Jon flashes them a mischievous grin as he begins to disappear. They watch as Jon's body flickers in and out.

"Yeah, sure," Frank replies with a laugh, knowing that he intends to give Jacob as much shit as possible. *It's amazing how fast a person can grow accustomed to odd things in certain situations,* he thinks as Jon disappears.

Wade pulls back onto the road and, a few minutes later, they arrive at a one story house. The paint on the outside is peeling slightly and faded in color.

The very house that Katie and I grew up in.

They walk to the door and pause there, neither one of them really wanting to knock. Wade shuffles his feet back and forth.

"I'm sorry, Frank. I should have told you," Wade says.

By now, Frank's anger has evaporated completely. He has never been able to stay mad at Wade for long, and he understands why his friend hadn't said anything.

"No, it's fine. I just want to figure out what happened and why we're supposed to

go to the Spook Light,” Frank replies, shaking his head. “Of all the places in the world, she wants me to believe in the Spook Light. Katie as a ghost, yeah, that’s just like her. But the Spook Light?”

Wade opens his mouth to reply when the porch light comes on, almost blinding them. The front door opens.

“Hey, boys, thought I heard something.” Frank’s father is standing there in a red checkered flannel shirt and worn down jeans.

Classic Dad, Frank thinks to himself, *The lines on his face make him look as if he has aged years, makes him seem so much older than the last time I saw him.*

“How’s Mom?” Frank asks.

His father, never one to show much emotion, smiles thinly. His blue eyes are puffy and red from crying. His gray hair pokes out everywhere from not combing it this morning.

“The doctor gave her a sedative. She should be out until the morning.” A second passes before his smile falters. “I love you, Son,” he says and gives Frank a hug. He turns to Wade, “And you, my number two son.”

“Is it safe for her to be sedated?” Wade asks.

When Frank was 13 years old, his mother went to the emergency room due to back pains that she had been having. After the doctors examined her, they found she had Marfan’s, an inherited disorder that affects the connective tissue of the heart and blood vessels. His mother had open-heart surgery shortly afterward. He remembers that he stayed in his room the entire time she was gone, not wanting to deal with the possibility that his mother might not be coming home.

As for Katie, she not only stayed up for two days cleaning the house from top to bottom, convinced their mother did that much cleaning on a daily basis, but she also insisted on seeing their Mom as soon as she woke up. Dad had gone to the hospital with Katie, while Frank had refused to go. Katie never said a word to anyone about what she saw in the hospital room, but, judging by the gray pallor on her face when she walked inside the house that day, it certainly couldn't have been a good thing.

Frank also recalls many times throughout the year when Katie would look at their Mother and blanch white. He could only imagine what their mother looked like; hooked up to the breathing apparatus, tubes coming from everywhere. Katie had been twelve at the time, fourteen months younger than Frank, but she had been so strong.

"The doctor said it would be better on her heart than letting her deal with the stress." Frank's father lights a cigarette, a habit Frank never took to considering his asthma.

Wade lights one of his own, and Frank turns to him with a frown, "I thought you quit?"

"I did. I thought you quit drinking?" Wade asks, knowing full well that Frank will now be receiving a detailed lecture at some later point in time about the drinking.

The older man shakes his head, looking away from Wade and Frank. Frank puts his middle finger to his glasses and pushes them up, flipping Wade the bird. Wade starts to snicker, and Frank's father returns his gaze to them.

"Huh?" the older man asks.

"Nothing, Dad," Frank answers. "I think I'll go inside while you finish your cancer

sticks.”

Frank walks inside the house, a house that harbors too many memories of him and Katie. Everywhere he looks, his mind recalls some thing or event that happened. He closes his eyes, trying to escape the memories, only to see a blood-soaked Katie. He snaps them open again, preferring to deal with happier times than with a dying sister, and notices a little girl poking her head around the corner of what used to be his bedroom door. She smiles at Frank hesitantly before walking around the door.

“H-hi,” she says.

Frank looks at the little girl, and his mouth gapes wide open. Standing in front of him is a carbon copy of his sister, what Katie looked like as a child; curly strawberry-blonde hair flowing just past her shoulders; the ever-present freckles Katie had been blessed with.

“Who are you?” she asks. Before Frank can answer, he hears footsteps.

“Katie?” Wade asks in a high-pitched voice.

The little girl instantly begins to cry. Frank’s father pushes the men to the side, rushing to her, and sweeping her into his arms. He rocks his body back and forth.

“It’s okay, Paige. Papa’s here. Papa’s here.” She hugs her grandfather closely as Wade sinks into a chair.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. Oh, shit. I’m sorry,” Wade repeats over and over, all the while rocking back and forth in the chair.

The chair keeps in time with the older man’s swaying. Paige sniffles, lifting her head and looking wide-eyed at Wade. She turns to her grandfather.

“Papa, that man said shit,” she whispers, and then frowns at Wade. “You’re not supposed to say that.”

Her grandfather cannot help but laugh at this display, and then everyone is laughing. Paige’s face brightens, knowing that she has just done something amusing.

“You’re not supposed to say that,” she repeats, this time wiggling a stubby finger at Wade. Wade stands up, walks over to her, and reaches out to pat her on the head,

“No, Paige. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

“Well, it’s okay this time.” Her brow wrinkles as if she is concentrating on something. “But, if you do it again, I’m gonna have to give you a time out.” This elicits more laughter, and Paige seems pleased with herself. Her grandfather points at Frank.

“This is your uncle Frank, Paige. He is...” He winces. “He *was* your Mommy’s brother.” Paige gives Frank a shy smile, quickly turning her attention back to Wade.

“My name’s Paige, what’s yours?” she asks him, climbing down from her grandfather’s arms and walking to Wade.

“You can call me uncle Wade.” He puts a hand up and she slaps a high five.

“Are you my Mommy’s brother too?” she asks.

Wade’s smile slips away, and Frank sees the beginning of tears in his eyes. He notices that Paige mentions her mother in the present tense, as if Katie were still alive, and he can’t help but feel a piece of his heart breaking.

Poor little girl, Frank thinks to himself, how horrible it must have been for her to see her mother bleeding like that.

“No, but I might as well have been. I grew up with your Mommy,” Wade answers,

playfully pushing Paige's hair out of her face.

She flinches and takes a step back. She raises a hand and puts her hair back in place before yawning. Paige turns to her grandfather,

"Can they meet Ethan?"

"Not now, honey," he answers. "Ethan is already asleep. As a matter of fact, you should think about going to bed too. It's very late."

"I can't go to sleep." Paige frowns, not happy with the order. "I need Mommy to sing to me." Wade and Frank exchange a painful glance.

"I'm sorry, but Mommy's not here, Paige. Papa can sing to you," her grandfather says.

Paige puts her hands on her hips, and Frank's father looks in the boys' direction for some help. A 30 and 31-year-old bachelor, they don't have much experience with children.

I don't have a clue what to do, Frank thinks.

Don't look at me, Wade thinks.

"I don't want *you* to sing to me, Papa. I want *Mommy* to sing," she whines.

"Paige, honey..." This is too much for the older man. He sinks to the floor and begins to weep.

"It's okay, Dad." Frank kneels down in front of Paige, giving her the most comforting smile he can muster. "Would you like Wade and me to sing to you?"

She stares into Frank's eyes, contemplating the offer. He is once again reminded of his sister as the little girl furrows her brow. She lets out a tiny "Humph" before nodding her head in agreement. She takes Frank by the hand and leads him to his old bedroom.

Frank glances over his shoulder to see Wade, a terrified expression on his friend's face.

"I can't sing, Frank."

"Well, neither can I, but, if I can try to believe in the Spook Light, than you can sing a song or two."

Wade follows after them in exasperation. Frank opens the door to the bedroom, the memories of his childhood flooding his brain. Everything in here has been changed. Although Frank can tell his mother has been using it for a sewing room, he sees his old bed in the corner of the room. A small child is nestled underneath the covers, and Frank assumes it is Ethan, Katie's two-year-old son. Paige walks to a sleeping bag that is lying on the floor and crawls inside, looking up expectantly.

"Hmm..." Frank clears his throat nervously. "Twinkle twinkle..." he begins to sing.

"No, no. You have to sing *Hey Jude*. That's what Mommy always sings," Paige insists.

Figures, Frank thinks to himself, *Katie was always a big Beatles fan.*

Frank searches his memory banks for the words to the song, watching Wade as his friend stands frozen.

"You gonna sing or what?" Frank asks.

"Hey Jude... don't make it bad..." they sing.

Paige closes her eyes as they continue to fumble their way through the song. Just about the time they reach the end of the second chorus, and when Frank is sure she has fallen asleep, she opens her eyes with a start and motions for Frank to come closer. He kneels down by her sleeping bag,

“What is it, Paige?”

“Can you tell someone something for me?” she asks.

Frank does not quite understand what she means, but figures that this must be a game she played with her mother, so he nods his head,

“Okay. What do you want me to say?”

He puts his ear next to her mouth so that she can whisper it to him. His eyes grow as large as saucers, and the room swirls in front of him as he hears her speak,

“Tell Jacob that He is still here.” Frank stands up, his knees shaking as he does so, and looks at her in amazement.

“Who’s still here?” he asks, but she has already closed her eyes.

They walk out of the bedroom and into the living room where Frank’s father has fallen asleep in the recliner. Frank gives his arm a shake.

“I’m gonna stay at Wade’s. I’ll be back in the morning to check on Mom.” He gives him another shake, “Did you call Brian, Dad?”

Brian, a friend they met in high school, and someone they kept in close contact with throughout the years, finally comes to mind. Frank can’t help but feel a hint of guilt at not calling him.

“Yeah, your Mom called him,” his father says groggily. “He’ll be in town tomorrow. Make sure you’re here by ten so we can all go to the service together.”

***The service?* Wade wonders.**

“The funeral’s tomorrow?” Frank asks, and his father nods his head, saying,

“We thought it would be best for the kids to do it as soon as possible.”

They were not expecting the funeral to happen so soon, and the mere mention of it started to drive the reality of Katie's death home. They say a quick goodbye to Frank's father, not bothering to get him out of his chair.

"What did Paige say?" Wade asks as soon as they reach the car.

"She told me to tell Jacob something. That He is still here," Frank replies, not sure at all what it means.

"Who's still here?"

Frank shrugs and gets into the passenger seat. A feeling of dread washes over him as he recalls their earlier promise to Jon.

"Are we really going to do this?" he asks, more to himself than to Wade. "Are we really going to go out there?"

The two men look at each other, already knowing the answer. Of course they are going to do this.

We're going to go to the Spook Light and, come hell or high water, Wade and I are going to do whatever it takes to keep Katie's children safe. Even if it means giving in to the old folklore of an unexplained place. A place that I have never believed in.

Frank has always thought that the Spook Light was nothing more than lights from a distant road, or a legend made up by some bored teenagers and passed down through the years. He knows for a fact that Wade had never given in to the myth of the Spook Light either and, although Katie used to go out there on a weekly basis, they rarely went with her. When they did, they spent most of their time making fun of her.

"Do you know how to get there?" Wade asks.

“Go back to the highway and take it to the Petro exit,” Frank instructs.

They make their way west on Interstate 44 until they come to exit 4. Wade follows it and turns left at the light. As they pass the Petro, an all night truck stop where they have spent many nights eating at the Iron Skillet, the hairs on Frank’s arms rise. He gets the sense that they are not the only ones in the car. He looks over his shoulder, but no one is there.

“Do you feel something?” he asks.

“Yeah. See anyone?”

Frank shakes his head, “no,” as they hit the outskirts of the business section. The energy in the car grows stronger the further they drive.

“Turn right at the next road,” Frank says.

They find themselves on a narrow road. They drive over a small bridge and soon come to the intersection of Gum and Hornet Road. Wade makes another right turn, by now knowing where he is at, and they proceed to drive through the hairpin twists and turns known as Gum Road. As they hit the first of a series of tall hills, Wade guns the engine, their speed reaching a cool 60 miles per hour. Frank closes his eyes and relishes the floating feeling in his stomach as Wade drives over the large dip in the road.

“Bet you thought I’d forgotten about that,” Wade says with a laugh, slowing the car to a snail’s pace. Another mile down the road and they are at a T-section. “Which way?”

“Left,” Frank replies. Wade turns left onto a gravel road and, a few moments later, Frank sees the sign. “There it is. Spook Light Road.”

They turn right and make their way down to a strip of land known as Devil’s

Promenade. Wade turns the car around and parks it halfway up the hill so that they will be facing the opposite direction of where the light usually comes from.

I don't remember why we did it this way. Katie always said it wouldn't come out if you were facing it.

The legend of the Spook Light has been around since the 1860's. A supposedly unexplained phenomenon, the Spook Light appears as a ball of light, varying in size. It has been known to change colors, split into two or three pieces, and typically weaves in and out of the trees.

When it first appears, it looks almost like a large lantern, although there isn't anyone holding on to it. When they have chased it, it has always retreated. Neither of them have seen it up close, but Katie used to swear up and down that it appeared inside her car once. Frank's mother also used to tell us a story about how it burnt the hood of her Dodge Dart. True, there has always been a long, black mark on the old car, but Frank never believed the story.

Theories behind the Spook Light vary depending on who you talk to. Some say that it is the spirit of an Indian searching for his lost love. Some say it is the spirit of a miner who had been decapitated.

"That's odd," Frank remarks when he realizes they are the only people there.

This is the first time they have come here without seeing any other vehicles. Although the road is completely empty, Frank gets the feeling they are not alone. He looks around, expecting to see Jon or Jacob appear. After thirty minutes, there is no sign of the ghosts, or the Spook Light.

“Maybe we should get out and walk around,” Wade suggests.

Tired of sitting in the car, Frank agrees. Just as they step out onto the gravel road, a flash of bright green whizzes past them. They hear high-pitched laughter and turn to where the light should be.

***Nothing. Must be my imagination,* Frank thinks to himself. As they start to walk down the dusty road, the green flash comes by again. “What the hell?”**

“Was that it?” Wade asks, and they freeze in our spots. They wait for the light to return. After a few minutes, they grow bored, and Wade pulls out a cigarette. “Man. I’ve never seen it that close before.”

“Me either,” Frank replies.

He looks around him, and into the forest at the edge of the road, seeing nothing but darkness. If the moon or stars are out, it is impossible to tell at this moment, the trees draping themselves over the road from both sides. He takes a seat, knowing that it could be hours before they figure out why they are here. Wade follows suit, and they fall into an almost peaceful silence.

***Where had the laughter come from?* he wonders to himself as Wade pokes him in the arm. “What?”**

“Over there. In the trees,” Wade says.

Frank follows the direction of Wade’s fingers, his eyes resting on a small group of trees about ten yards from where they are sitting. Bobbing and weaving in and out is a small green orb. The brightness of the light dims, and then becomes so bright that it hurts their eyes. The light starts to move, coming closer to them. In a matter of seconds, it has

grown ten times its size, and it floats directly in front of them. The light is so overwhelming that they are forced to squint, and then... There it is again... Laughter. Familiar laughter.

“Katie?” Frank asks, only to hear another laugh. Now, when he stares into the huge orb, he can see the figure of his sister inside.

“Hey, Frankie, thanks for coming,” she says. Her image flickers in and out, changing from green to a banana yellow.

“Why are we here?”

“This is the only place I can see you for now, other than your dreams of course.” She smiles. “I’m not as strong as Jacob yet, although I hope to be soon. Then I can visit you anytime.”

Now that Frank is face to face with her, there are so many questions that need to be answered, and he has no idea where to start. He opens his mouth to speak when Wade chimes in,

“Who did this to you?”

“Robert, Jacob’s father.” Her brow furrows. “He took over Mark’s body and, when I tried to get his spirit out, he attacked me and set the house on fire. I managed to get the kids out, but...” her eyes take a vacant expression as she trails off.

“Katie?” Frank asks.

“Sorry.” She shakes her head. “It’s easy to get lost out here. Easy to lose focus.” She looks confused for a moment, and then her face brightens as if she has just remembered something. “The fire, yes. We were talking about the fire, but that’s not important. Someone’s after the kids. We haven’t been able to figure out who it is, but we know

someone's watching them." She looks into Frank's eyes. "Mark can't take care of them, Frankie. I need you and Wade to help them. Most important, you both need to be very careful. Once you open yourself up to the idea of our existence, you will find yourself surrounded with so many of us. It can be quite maddening actually."

Frank gets the sense that she is speaking from first-hand experience, and he cannot help but wonder what else went on in that house.

"Why did Robert come after you?"

"Not now, Frank," she answers, frowning. "Someday, we can all sit down and talk about that. For now, I need you to focus on the kids. You have to save them. You have to finish what I started because I can't. Not like this I can't."

She whips her head around, looking over her shoulder as another light, this one much larger and more brilliant, approaches. It is Jacob. Once he reaches Katie, his light flickers in and out, finally disappearing completely.

"Sorry I'm late. I'm not accustomed to doing this." He shakes his body and looks to Katie. "I don't know how you can stand that, Katie. It feels..."

"Slimy," she finishes for him.

"Paige has a message for you," Wade says to Jacob.

The ghost's face instantly grows alarmed. Frank watches Katie to see her expression, but she acts as if she didn't hear Wade. The light surrounding her switches to an almost steel gray color, and it becomes difficult to make her out in the darkness.

How can she be so passive? So calm? Frank wonders as Jacob turns to him.

"She's fading. Even using the Spook Light's energy, she isn't strong enough to stay

for very long.” He looks almost angry when he continues, “I don’t think you can even begin to understand what it takes for her to do this. She’s doing it for the kids, Frank.”

Frank feels a flash of anger at him for reading his mind, but it is quickly replaced with guilt. Wade looks at Jacob in confusion as Frank apologizes,

“I’m sorry, Jacob. I know she loves her kids. We’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure they’re okay. I promise.” Jacob seems satisfied with this and turns back to Wade,

“What did Paige say?”

“She said to tell you that He is still here,” Wade answers.

Jacob’s breath draws in. His eyes close, and he raises a hand to his face. In the meantime, Katie has almost dissipated completely.

“What? What did he say?” she asks. Jacob shakes his head back and forth as he pleads with Frank and Wade,

“Don’t say anything to Katie. I was afraid he would find a way back,” he whispers.

“What? I can’t hear you, Jacob,” Katie says, and then she is gone.

“Who’s still here? Is Paige talking about your dad?” Frank asks, fear rising inside him as Jacob nods.

“I think so,” the ghost replies.

Frank’s fingers go to the bridge of his nose, his pounding headache returning with a vengeance. He takes his glasses off, exasperated. “I don’t understand any of this. Your dad took over Mark’s body, and then hurt my sister?”

“Yep,” Jacob answers.

“Then he set the house on fire and Katie b-b-bled to death.” Frank stumbles over the last words, his mouth, along with the rest of his body, numb with fatigue and shock.

“And now he’s after the kids, yes,” Jacob answers, biting his lips as if he is waiting for Frank to explode. “That’s not all.”

“That’s not all? What else could there possibly be?” Frank looks at Jacob, the ghost a bright blur without his glasses on.

“Well, the kids aren’t the only ones in danger,” Jacob answers.

“Who is it?” The question comes across harsh, but Frank does not care. *Ever since my sister died, my world has been slip-sliding away into something else. Something I don’t comprehend or understand, not even slightly. Now Jacob is standing here telling me that I’m going to have to protect someone else besides the kids?*

“We’re not sure.” Jacob cringes.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure?” Frank screams. “How can you say that the kids aren’t the only ones in danger, and then not tell me who you’re talking about?” His throat starts to constrict, and his breath comes in short rasps.

“Frank?” Wade looks on with concern as Frank’s face turns red.

Frank waves his arms frantically, motioning toward the car. He loses his grip on his glasses, and they fall to the ground. Understanding dawns on Wade.

“Oh, yeah,” Wade says before sprinting to the car.

Wade returns with the inhaler as each breath Frank takes burns like an inferno. Jacob stands patiently, waiting for the breathing to slow. The serene look on the ghost’s face makes Frank’s blood boil, and he has to fight himself not to punch Jacob. His chest

finally starts to expand in a normal fashion, and his initial panic calms. He takes a deep breath in before glaring at Jacob,

“Well? Are you going to answer my question or not? Who is it?”

“Katie and I were hoping that maybe the two of you could tell us,” Jacob answers.

Frank’s right hand clinches into a tight fist, and his chest starts to heave again. He takes another shot of ibutanol to prevent a further attack. The frustration that has been mounting during the course of the day is now overflowing.

Has it just been one day? Is it possible that all of this has happened over the last 24 hours? He checks his watch to see that it is already midnight. *Time flies when you’re having fun. Yeah, right.*

“How could Frank or I know anything?” Wade asks, breaking Frank’s thoughts, and bringing them back to the subject at hand.

“Katie saw a glimpse of something right before she died. Something that happened here, at the Spook Light.” Jacob sighs, a tired sound escaping from him.

What must it be like for him? Wade wonders. Do spirits get tired? On some level they must because, staring at Jacob now, he looks as if he has aged. Nothing in his physical appearance has changed, but his stance, his demeanor, looks ragged and worn.

“What did she see?” Frank asks as his body returns to normal.

“Not much, really. She said it came in a few, quick flashes. She saw the two of you, and someone named Brian, standing in front of a car. Then, someone was on the ground...” Jacob pauses, taking a deep breath of air and letting it out, his cheeks puffing up like a chipmunk as he does so. “The person on the ground was dead, but she couldn’t tell who it

was. Katie said that all she could see at that point was Liza screaming.”

“L-L...” Frank closes his eyes, the mention of Liza’s name filling his stomach with knots. “She was there?”

Liza and Katie had been friends since their freshman year in high school, but that wasn’t the reason for the tingling sensation running up and down Frank’s spine.

Frank was getting ready to graduate from Missouri Southern, and Liza had just applied to a school in Boston when they happened to run into each other at a party. That was the first time Frank had ever seen her without Katie by her side, and there was something different about her, something that caught his eye the moment she walked into the room.

No longer the obnoxious girl who always tagged along because she knew Katie, Liza was charming and funny. Even though she had always been a short person, a mere 5’5” to Frank’s towering 6’8”, and a little on the plump side, she exuded a sensual quality about her. They went home together that night and, what had started out as a one night stand, turned into something deep and meaningful.

After a few weeks, Frank knew he was hooked on her and wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life by her side. One month later, he proposed. To his, and everyone else’s, surprise, he was rejected. Liza was intent on going to school in Boston and didn’t want a long-distance relationship. She told him that she couldn’t be Katie. Katie was married to Jon at the time, and Jon had been in the Navy for almost two years.

Although he was completely heart broken, he understood where she was coming from. He had watched his sister shed many a tear over Jon, watched as Jon grew more

distant from Katie with each and every visit. He knew that Katie and Jon loved each other, but it was only a matter of time before it would end.

He didn't want it to be that way with Liza, so they went to the jewelry store the next day and exchanged the engagement ring he had bought for a promise ring.

"I promise I will always be here for you... waiting."

Frank remembers the tears in her eyes, a thin line of mascara running down her cheek, as she replied,

"And I promise to come back," She had brought a hand to his face, her thumb lightly grazing his chin, and causing chills to flow throughout his body. "Someday, Frank. I promise. Someday."

The day before Frank graduated from college, he drove Liza to the airport and said goodbye. When he got back to his apartment, Wade was waiting, a beer in one hand and an envelope in the other.

"I found this on your bed," Wade said.

Frank took the envelope and opened it, sinking to the floor when he saw what was inside. The promise ring slid out as he grabbed for the beer, a glint of gold flashing as the ring twirled and twirled, finally landing on the floor with a "thunk."

"How are we supposed to find out who it was?" Frank asks, willing his brain to think of anything except Liza. "I'm not a psychic, Jacob, and, last time I checked, neither was Wade."

"Don't look at me," Wade says. "This has always been Katie's thing. She was the resident expert on all the weird stuff."

“Yeah?” Jacob asks, a slight grin on his face. “And what did you guys specialize in?”

Wade and Frank glance at each other, shrugging their shoulders before answering in unison,

“Beer.”

Jacob chuckles, and the sound of his laugh becomes intoxicating. Wade and Frank join in. Frank watches Jacob, the ghost’s cool blue eyes twinkling.

You know, I can see myself actually liking this guy, can understand why my sister would be attracted to him. In a small way he was a lot like Jon. So much that it was kinda eerie. On the other hand, he was so very different from Jon. His hair was much darker than Jon’s, his skin a deeper brown. That was a part of the difference, but, most important, was the look in his eyes when he had been standing next to my sister.

“So now what?” Wade asks as the laughter begins to recede. Jacob runs a hand down his neck, clearing his throat,

“Well, Katie thinks, if we can figure out who was here in her vision, we might get a better idea of the situation. Then we can try to stop it from happening.”

“That’s great, Jacob. We just figure out who was here,” Wade says, the sarcasm dripping in his voice. “Hello... McFly, I think we knew that much already. The question is, how the hell are we going to do that? Katie was the only one who saw the vision. Unless you have a time machine handy to take us back to when she saw it...” Wade trails off as Jacob nods his head up and down.

“You’re k-k-kidding, right?” Frank stammers, craning his head to look around

Jacob. *I don't see anything there. Considering everything else that has happened, I don't think I would be the least bit surprised if there were a machine behind him.* "There's no such thing as time travel." Jacob raises an eyebrow,

"Not in the way that you think, no. Let's just say that time travel is something I specialize in. I haven't tried it since... since the fire, but it looks like the only option we've got at this point."

"Ha," Wade rolls his eyes, clearly not convinced. "So, should we wait until Tinkerbell gets here with the fairy dust, or are you hiding your Dolorian behind the trees?" Jacob glares at Wade, not amused with his taunting. Frank gives Wade a poke in the ribs. "What? Ghosts are one thing, Frankie, but time machines?"

"How does it work?" Frank asks, ignoring Wade.

Frank brings a finger to his nose, meaning to push his glasses up, only to remember that they had fallen on the ground during his asthma attack. He bends over, squinting at the gravel. As he begins to search for them, he feels a hand on his shoulder. An electric shock runs down his arm, so strong that it causes him to stand back up. His body arches toward the sky, and the trees begin to swirl around him.

"It's simple really," Jacob answers.

Although Frank knows it must be Jacob's hand on his shoulder, the voice sounds distant, as if it were coming through a long tunnel, or a tin can connected to a string.

Just like the tin cans Katie and I would run from my room to hers.

Another jolt, stronger this time, sends Frank's body into spasms and, as everything turns completely dark, he hears Katie,

“Go to sleep, Frankie. Go to sleep.”

Chapter 8-

Frank opens his eyes, not sure what has just happened. He turns to yell at Jacob, but the ghost is gone.

“Yeah, sure. You can run but you can’t hide, Jacob. I’ll get you back for that. Just wait and...” the last word gets stuck in his throat as he realizes Wade isn’t here either. He spins around, sure Wade is hiding behind the trees. “Shit. Where’s the car?” He asks, apparently to the trees since the entire road is completely deserted.

He begins to make his way up the road, wondering how far it is to the closest pay phone. The sky is still dark, and the trees come alive for a moment as a gust of cold wind blows through. Frank shivers, pulling his coat tighter around himself. He glances at his watch: 10:30.

“Nooo...” he says, not believing what the dials on his watch are telling him. He shakes his wrist a couple of times, squinting at the hands again: 10:31. “That’s it. I am officially losing my mind.” He turns around, just then remembering his glasses, and walks down the hill. *Now, where were we at?*

He walks carefully, his hands on his knees as he bends over. He squints, searching through dirt and gravel that all looks identical. He catches a glimpse of something shining in the moonlight and turns to his left. His jaw drops open, his eyes growing wide, as he realizes what the shiny object is.

He takes a step back as the small glimmer begins to sparkle like a meteor shower. The trees in front of him begin to twist and turn, and he can see bits and pieces of Wade’s

face. The sparkle transforms into an all out shine, and he is forced to cover his eyes. The brightness disappears, and Frank removes his hands from his face, blinking for a moment in an effort to get used to the dark. Wade is standing there with the most outraged expression Frank has ever seen him wear.

“Don’t bother. Jacob isn’t here,” Frank tells him. Wade jumps.

“Don’t scare me like that, man.” Wade looks at their surroundings. “Um... Frank?”

“Hmm?” Frank tries to sound calm, although his stomach is tying itself into knots.

“Where’s the car?” Wade asks, his angry face changing into a look of apprehension.

“Where’s the car, Frank?”

“I don’t know, but that’s not all. My watch says it’s only 10:30. Somehow Jacob has brought us here... except...”

“Ohhh...” Wade takes a seat on the ground, realization sinking in, “*He’s* the time machine.”

Frank opens his mouth, meaning to warn Wade not to sit on his glasses, when he sees a pair of lights shining in the trees.

The Spook Light? Wade wonders.

“Car,” Frank says, motioning for Wade to get up. He grabs Wade’s hand and hoists his friend’s hefty body up as the lights grow closer. “C’mon. C’mon.”

Wade dusts himself off, and they step over the shallow gully that separates the road from the forest. Wade looks over his shoulder,

“Hey, there’s your glasses.” Wade turns around to grab them as Frank sees a light-colored car rise over the peak of the hill, the headlights shining directly in front of Wade’s

shoes.

“No time for that now. Get over here,” Frank orders.

Frank grabs Wade by the shoulders and shoves him behind a tree just as the car’s headlights wash over the spot where they had been standing. Frank lets out a sigh of relief, although he has no clue why he feels so relieved when he gets the notion he is about to witness something he does not really want to see.

Another car appears at the top of the hill. The first car passes by their hiding spot, driving to the junction known as Devil’s Promenade before turning around and coming back in their direction. The second car, much larger and darker in color, follows suit. Frank squeezes his eyelids as tight as he can without shutting them, but can’t see much save for the bright yellow coming from the headlights.

The first car, a white Ford Taurus Frank finally makes out, settles a few yards from their hiding spot, and he prays no one will be able to see their two hulking bodies behind this tree. The Taurus turns its lights off, while the second car pulls behind it.

“Holy smokes. That’s my Jeep,” Wade whispers from behind Frank.

The second pair of headlights are shut off, and they are once again left in almost complete darkness, the pitch-black slightly illuminated by the few slivers of moonlight that the trees are allowing in.

They soon hear the sound of laughter, and Frank recognizes Wade’s voice, although the sound is coming from in front of him, as opposed to behind him where it should have. Frank looks over his shoulder to see Wade, his friend’s body flickering in and out, blending in with the deepness of the forest.

“Frank?” Wade asks from far away. He looks down at his hands, the horrified expression on his face barely visible. “Frank?” very faintly this time, and then he is gone. Frank looks at his hands in panic.

“Not yet, Jacob. It’s too soon,” Frank says under his breath, praying that, somehow, he will be able to stay here long enough to see who else is sitting in the cars.

“Did you hear something?” A female voice asks from the safety of the white Taurus.

“Oh, Geez, you’re not going to flake out on me already are ya?” Another female voice, this one recognizable.

Katie? How is that possible?

“I’m not flaking out. I swear I heard someone talking,” the other girl says.

“Well, get out and look then,” Katie counters. The *ding ding* from the car rings through the otherwise quiet night as the occupants of the Taurus exit. “Don’t forget the keys, Brian,”

Certainly she isn’t talking to my Brian? Frank wonders.

“I won’t, rabbit. I won’t,” Brian replies.

Frank sees a fourth person jump out from the passenger side of the Taurus with a tall and lanky sort of build, but the figure’s back is to Frank as he walks to the Jeep. The stranger raps on the driver’s window. The driver in the Jeep rolls down his window, and Frank lets out a gasp as he sees Wade’s profile lean out. Wade scruffs the other man’s hair.

“Hey, Sparky, you getting out of the car or what?” the other man, no longer a stranger to Frank, asks, and then turns to Katie. “Hey, Katie, I think Wade and Frank are scared.”

Jon? Katie?

“Aww... poor Frankie. Are you too scared to come out here with the big kids and play?” Katie teases, and then Jon lets out a laugh.

The sound echoes across the deserted road, causing a few birds to flee the sanctuary of the trees. A rush of deja vu floods through Frank’s memory banks, something about this whole situation kicking his brain into drive.

No. No. This isn’t right. This isn’t the future. This is the past. I remember this night. Wade’s date had backed out at the last minute and Brian, like most of the time, was flying solo. Jon wasn’t my brother-in-law yet and Liza hadn’t left for Boston.

“Why am I here?” Frank asks himself.

Just then, Katie’s laughter stops, and her body rotates in his direction. She did the same thing that night, he recalls, but doesn’t remember exactly why, although he does know what she will say now.

“Frank?” she asks, her eyes making full contact with his.

Frank’s entire body goes cold, his heart freezing on its last beat. Not because Katie has seen him, but because Frank; the Frank of that night, a Frank from years ago, a head fully covered in hair and a confident walk that he will lose a few days later when Liza says good-bye, is standing before him. He tries to breathe, to move, but remains plastered in his spot.

That’s me, is all he hears running through his mind. That’s me... and the girl with Katie is Liza.

“What?” The younger Frank asks.

“Nothing,” Katie whispers, her voice barely audible.

“I’m cold,” Liza complains, sidling up to the younger Frank, her way of saying she would rather be alone at his apartment with him right now. Frank gives her a short peck on the forehead, his way of promising that it won’t be much longer before they are alone.

“Oh, don’t worry, Frankie, buddy, it won’t be too much longer. In about five minutes Liza is going to feign being sick and the two of you will be on your merry way to the Love Shack,” Frank says to himself.

His breath returns in a few, quick gasps, the very idea of what he, well the former him to be exact, will be doing thirty minutes from now driving the heat back into his frozen body.

Why am I here? He asks himself again. Nothing weird happens tonight. We take a walk up to Devil’s Promenade, clown around for a bit, and then Liza and I are out of here. As if right on cue, Jon says,

“Let’s walk up the road a bit.” Jon walks to Katie’s side as she continues to stare at the trees. “Katie, baby, you okay?” Katie shakes her head, finally letting Jon take her hand.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine,” she mutters, turning to Jon and giving him a kiss.

“Well, isn’t that just special. I wonder who could have made them do that. Could it be ... umm ... Satan?” Brian says, using his best Church Lady voice from *Saturday Night Live*.

“Bite me, Bri,” Jon retorts, and everyone begins to laugh. Wade erupts into a loud snort.

***Man, those were some good times,* Frank thinks to himself, as the group starts to**

walk farther down the hill, Katie being reluctantly guided by Jon.

“Why is it that your dates always end up backing out on you, Wade?” Jon asks, punching Wade in the shoulder with his free hand, obviously trying to pay him back for the snort.

“Hey. Didn’t ya know?” Wade is quick to come back, “I’m just smooth like that.” This time, Frank is unable to keep his laughter from coming.

Classic Wade.

They pass the rear of the Jeep, their faces and proportions growing fuzzier with each step, Frank’s vision not very good without his glasses. Mixing that with the darkness of the night, he is forced to squint in an effort to make them out. Katie glances over her shoulder, looking directly at him, and, although he can’t see her face, he knows she is absolutely terrified of something. He feels the fear rising off her body and moving in waves toward him.

“What, Katie? What is it?” he whispers into the night.

Frank recalls his sister acting like this that night; afraid of something, glancing now and then into the woods with a paranoid expression on her face. He never asked her why she had been acting so strangely, too caught up with his own hormones to give her behavior a second thought.

“What is it?” he repeats, just as he hears a noise from the other side of the road. His eyes dart over, scanning the cover of the trees for a sign of movement.

“Try to run, Frankie...” a voice hisses in his ears.

Frank spins around, his hands clenched into fists and ready to fight, but there is no

one. Again, a rustle from across the road and, when he turns to look, he sees the faint shadow of a figure. A hulking silhouette standing next to an oak tree.

Another tree, Frankie, it's just another tree, he tries to tell himself, even though the hair on his arms stand at full attention, and his heart shifts into a rapid beating.

A quick glance down the road, and he sees the group fading away as they draw closer to Devil's Promenade. Muffled voices followed by more laughter.

Nothing weird about this night, he reminds himself, *just a few friends out having a good time*. He ventures a look back to the oak tree across the road. *Nothing*.

Frank takes a step forward from his hiding place, figuring it is now safe to retrieve his glasses. The hissing voice returns,

"Try to hide." Frank looks to the oak tree and, this time, he sees someone, the hulking silhouette returning.

"Who the hell are you?" he asks the strange figure standing just a few yards from him, while cursing himself for not thinking to get his glasses sooner. The figure doesn't answer, but throws his head back and releases a high-pitched cackle. "Who the hell are ..." the words get stuck in Frank's throat as the figure stops laughing.

The figure focuses his gaze on Frank. Frank can't make out the face, but the stranger's eyes begin to glow a deep red, the color switching to an orangish-blue as if they were on fire.

Just as the thought flickers through Frank's brain, he feels the heat from the figure's eyes penetrate into his very soul. He tries to look away to no avail. His hands begin to tingle, a burning sensation starting at his fingertips and working its way up his arms.

I'm on fire, Frank thinks in a panic, I'm burning up.

Frank's chest squeezes tight, and he starts to choke on invisible fumes. Laughter echoes in the distance, and the figure breaks his gaze.

Air. Cool air rushing back into his lungs. Frank kneels over, relishing the oxygen as it flows in and out of his mouth. His chest relaxes, and his legs turn into jello. He sees his glasses right in front of him and reaches down, grabbing them and returning them to his face.

A blink of the eyes, and everything comes in clear and focused. Frank looks up in time to see the strange figure sprint toward Devil's Promenade. He opens his mouth, ready to shout a warning, only to hear Liza scream.

Frank runs in the direction of Liza's shrieking, stumbling every few steps as his legs try to regain their composure. He finally makes out figures on the road, a group of people huddled over something. As if the group senses his presence, they each take a step away from what they were looking at, revealing a body lying on the ground.

"He's not breathing," Katie says in a shaky voice.

Frank takes another step, craning his neck in an effort to see who is on the ground, but, when his foot should be making contact with gravel, he feels nothing. He looks down to see that his feet have completely disappeared. He lifts his hands in front of his face, watching as they flicker and meld with the surroundings.

"This isn't right. This isn't right," he says as he fades into nothingness.