

Monarch

By : Phillip Lanuto III

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.



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The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds.

The only time Martin felt in control of his life was behind the wheel of his car. His parents had given him a used Toyota Tercel for his sixteenth birthday and once he got his full license he spent hours exploring back roads. He could speed it up, stop it, change its direction, and even kill it if he desired. When a really good song came over the radio, he floored the accelerator and for a moment at least, felt like the master of the universe.

After the humiliation with Preston, there was nothing he needed more than to escape. He arrived home, dodged his mother, and jumped into the car. He moved carefully out of the driveway and through the center of town.

He hated Wellow Falls. He'd miss his Mom and Dad but Martin couldn't wait to leave. He turned onto the highway, upshifted to fifth, and watched the speedometer climb and climb until he was whizzing by other cars. Boston was half an hour away and he drove until he reached the railroad yards on the outskirts of the city. The yard gave him a good view of the city and he watched a beautiful sunset bath the skyscrapers in flaming red. It was getting late and Martin knew he needed to get back. He didn't want his parents to worry and he felt somewhat better.

Someday, he thought, looking at the big city, I'll be bigger than all of them, and then they'll all be sorry about how they treated me.

He sped back down the hallway and took Exit 16, whizzing by the Wellow Falls Motor inn. Exit 16 narrowed and became more of a country road. Out of the middle of nowhere a red blur materialized. Martin slammed on his brakes and the car skidded, slid a bit to the right, and came to a lurching stop. He looked in his rearview mirror and could see the red blur approaching the car.

What the hell was he doing? His heart pounded. Martin looked back and saw a person in some sort of red robe. As the figure walked towards his car, he could see that it was a woman.

What kind of crazy woman walked alone at night in a red robe? Goosebumps rippled up his arms and legs and he felt a deep dread in the pit of his stomach. He shouldn't have stopped and wanted to leave. Martin shifted into first gear and began to let up the clutch. That was when she lifted the handle and opened the door. His trembling foot caused him to release the clutch too soon and the car violently jerked forward before stalling. The interior lights blinked on and off, on and off, casting eerie shadows across her face.

"Relax Martin." The words sounded sweet, nice.

"Just having a little clutch problem," he said in a cold sweat, wanting her to leave. She slid into the passenger

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seat. The woman was beautiful. Her hair was jet black, and her eyes were deep, like an ocean of infinity. Martin swallowed and tried to smile. She wore a red robe which flowed from her neck to her feet. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Who are you?" he finally managed to stammer through the terror and the fear.

"I am Monarch." Her voice was pleasant enough and he relaxed a bit. "Martin, don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

"Help me, how?" How could this robed woman help him? What did she know about his problems?

She snapped her fingers and the front window of the car began to fog.

"Hey, what are..." She put her hand on his arm and smiled.

"Watch Martin." The fog flashed and he saw the hallway of Teddy Roosevelt High School. The view moved forward and he saw a cordon of classmates staring at some spectacle. The circle broke and Martin saw himself running down the hallway, tears in his eyes, his face blackened by the carbon paper. The images scattered into colors before coalescing again.

"I know all about you Martin. You're very special, very unique. Let me help you and you will attain your every desire." A figure staggered down a street and he realized it was Preston Dregor. The bully looked around, kicked a can, and took a left onto a side street somewhere near the train tracks.

"If it is revenge you want, it is a dish you shall have." More swirling and then he saw Kathy Leer, his teacher in her rented house. She took off her earrings in front of a mirror. When she had removed them, she began to unbutton her shirt. She undid the first, the second, pulled her sleeves out, neatly folded the shirt, and put it on her bed. Martin exhaled at the sight of her creamy belly and the black bra that cupped her breasts. She reached behind her back and after a second of fumbling, the bra slid down her shoulders, revealing her chest and the pink nipples. The image dissolved.

"I can give you women and happiness, beauty and freedom. I will give the words to say and the actions to do. And people will listen to you, they will worship you."

"How can you do this for me?" he asked. "How can you help me?"

She laughed and it sounded like a teacher being amused by one of her students. She reached inside her robe and drew out a long silver nail with a very sharp point. To pointy for his liking. The interior lights in his car flared on for a moment and then went dead. A sick, grey light emanated from the nail. Her face wasn't pleasant or beautiful anymore, it looked like a hunter eyeing its prey.

The vision cleared from the windshield and something smacked against the glass. He jumped. Something else smacked the window and then there was a storm of red, like snow burying the car. The windshield was completely covered by tiny, moving objects. Butterflies, were they red butterflies? He looked at the side windows and they were also covered.

Oh my god, please someone, help me.

"How can I help you? Good question. You're a very intelligent boy, I like that." She slowly rotated the nail in her hand. "Every present has its price Martin, you know that don't you?" He frantically searched for the handle as she continued to talk.

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"What do you have to pay? Perhaps your left hand or your left nut? No, Martin, do you think me a witch, I wouldn't ask for something so valuable. I just want your soul. That's not a very large price is it?" she purred. Martin would have screamed then if she hadn't arced the nail towards his face. It pierced him under the chin and drove into his mouth, cutting off his howl. The nail sliced through his tongue, pinning it to the roof of his mouth. A trickle of warm blood dribbled down his neck. The remnant of his aborted howl shot out his nose as a gust of warm, bloody air.

The red robed figure stepped out of the car and walked around the corner and into an ally beside Demilo's Drugs and the Wellow Falls dry cleaners. Thousands of red butterflies fluttered madly, following her into the darkness of the night.

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Martin had no real friends except for his car. It wasn't really a friend, but driving it soothed him. The only time he ever felt in control of his life was behind the wheel. He could speed it up, stop it, change its direction, and even kill it if he desired. When a really good song came over the radio, he felt like the master of the universe, and that anything and everything was in his power and ability.

After the humiliation with Preston, there was nothing he needed more than to escape. He arrived home, dodged his mother, and jumped into the car. He moved carefully out of the driveway and through the center of town.

God how he hated Wellow Falls! His life in the town had never been happy and Martin looked forward to the day when he would leave. He didn't like to wish evil thoughts, but the town could fall off the map and he would be just as glad. He turned onto the highway and drove, upshifting to fifth and watching the speedometer climb and climb until he was whizzing by other cars and could feel the speed around him. The big city was half an hour away and he drove to the outskirts and parked the car. He watched the happenings of the city as day turned to dusk and slowly the streetlights flickered on and the city brightened to life. He looked at his watch and realized he needed to get back. He didn't want his parents to worry and he felt somewhat better.

Someday, he thought, looking at the big city, I'll be bigger than all of them, and then they'll all be sorry about how they treated me.

He returned along the highway and exited beside the new Wellow Falls Motor inn. Although it was dark and the road was dimly lit, he sped on, down the narrow streets and through the turns. Out of the middle of nowhere a red blur materialized. Martin slammed on his brakes and the car skidded, slid a bit to the right, and came to a lurching stop. He looked in his rearview mirror and could see the red blur approaching the car.

What the hell was he doing? His heart was thudding. The form was closer and he could see that it was a person in some sort of red robe. He caught a glimpse of the moon as he looked back and his body began to tremble. Its pocked silver surface was obscured by a deep reddish halo. Martin blinked, wiped his eyes, and looked back. The figure's constant gait had nearly brought it to the back of the car, allowing Martin to discern that it was a woman. A gust of wind blew her black hair alive and it rose and cut wide streaks against the redness of the moon. The streaks expanded and became black holes which spread, devouring the red surface.

"What the heck." The blackness spread like a slow motion explosion. Tendrils of black curled around one edge and then reappeared around the opposite side like arms of a rampaging octopus. They worked inward and swallowed his lunar dream. Where the moon had once flowed high in the sky, there was now only the

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cold darkness of celestial space.

Seeing the moon disappear was enough to convince him that something was amiss. He shifted into first gear and began to let up the clutch. That was when she lifted the handle and opened the door. Martin tried to get the car moving, but his trembling foot caused him to release the clutch too soon. The car violently jerked forward before stalling. The interior lights blinked on and off, on and off, casting eerie shadows across her face.

"Relax Martin." The words sounded sweet, very nice.

"Just having a little clutch problem," he said in a cold sweat, wanting her to leave. She fully opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. The woman was beautiful. Her hair was jet black and matched the almost hypnotic nothingness of her eyes. Her eyes were a vast black expanse, like an ocean of infinity and Martin swallowed and tried to smile. The eyes devoured him and turned his body and thoughts inside out. He shifted uncomfortably. She wore some type of red robe which flowed freely from her neck to her feet.

Where had this lady come from and why was she wearing a robe? "Who are you?" he finally managed to stammer through the terror and the fear.

"I am Monarch." It hardly allayed his worry. She noticed the fear on his face.

"Martin, don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

"Help me, how?" How could this robed woman help him? What did she know about his problems?

She snapped her fingers and the front window of the car began to fog.

"Hey, what are..." She put her hand on his arm and smiled.

"Sit Martin." He leaned back and watched the outside view disappear. The fog swirled and then began to condense into a myriad of different colors and shapes. The colors and shapes coalesced and he saw the high school hallway. The view moved forward and he saw a cordon of classmates staring inward and realized he was looking at past day's traumatic events. The circle broke and saw himself running down the hallway, tears in his eyes, his face blackened by the carbon paper. Martin exhaled and the images broke up and began to reform.

"I know all about you Martin. You're very special, very unique. Let me help you and you will attain your every desire." A figure staggered down a street and he realized it was Preston Dregor. The bully looked around, kicked a can, and took a left onto a side street off somewhere near the train tracks.

"If it is revenge you want, it is a dish you shall have." More swirling and then he saw Kathy Leer, his teacher in her rented house. She was taking off her earrings in front of a mirror. When she had removed them, she began to unbutton her shirt. She undid the first, the second and then she was done and she pulled her sleeves out, neatly folded the shirt, and put it on her bed. Martin exhaled at the sight of her creamy belly and back and the black bra that cupped her breasts. She reached behind her back and after a second of fumbling, the bra slid down her shoulders, revealing her chest and the pink nipples. The image dissolved.

"I can give you women and happiness, beauty and freedom. I will give the words to say and the actions to do. And they will all listen to you."

He listened transfixed, Kathy's nudity still etched deeply in his mind.

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"How can you do this for me?" he asked, his eyes practically spinning in circles. "How can you help me?" he asked in a mixture of desire and fear but with a hungry look that said 'yes please, give me castles and virgin maidens, treasure chests of gold, and the heads of my worst enemies. Give me strength and wisdom, power and might, and everything I have dreamed about in my best dreams. Give me it all because I have been without it for so long and need something, even if the chances of getting it are a thousand to one. At least give me the promise and the chance to hope."

She smiled and then laughed and to Martin it sounded beautiful, like the sound of a Saturday morning rain, or the distant full peel of thunder. It was commanding and majestic. She reached inside her robe and drew something out. Martin felt his bowels loosen and a shudder rode a wave down his spinal cord.

It was a long silver nail with a very sharp point. Too pointy for his liking. It glinted in the dim light like a magical weapon from Camelot. Her eyes had become stormy and fierce and Martin could feel furious waves of hatred assaulting him. He could origin of the red glow. It radiated from her body and bathed the car in a veritable dark light.

"How can I help you? Good question. You're a very intelligent boy, I like that." She slowly rotated the nail in her hand. "Every present has its price Martin, you know that don't you?" His mouth locked up and he realized he was terrified beyond words or movement. She continued to talk.

"What do you have to pay? Perhaps your left hand, or you're left nut. No, Martin, do you think me a witch, I wouldn't ask for something so valuable. I just want your pathetic little soul. That's not a very large price is it?" she purred. Martin would have screamed then if she hadn't arced the nail towards his face. It pierced him under the chin and drove into his mouth, cutting off his howl. The nail sliced through his tongue, pinning it to the roof of his mouth. A trickle of warm blood dribbled down his neck. He would have screamed if he had been able to pry his mouth open. The remnant of his aborted howl shot out his nose as a gust of warm, bloody air.

The red robed figure stepped out of the car and walked around the corner and into an ally beside the Demilo's Drugs and the Wellow Falls dry cleaners. The butterflies fluttered madly around, before following her into the darkness of the night.

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Preston Dregor, the boy who had humiliated Martin walked slowly up the steps of his house and jiggled the key in the lock. He apprehensively turned the key, heard the latch click, and slowly swung the door open. The kitchen was quite except for the soft hum of the refrigerator. Preston was perspiring and his hands twitched and trembled. He stopped for an instant, listened, and then quietly walked through the kitchen into the living room and up the stairs. They creaked and Preston felt the shakes increase in his hand. The little pulse in his forehead began to bubble, speaking to him of the rage and the fury. Then the sound came to him, like the call of the grim reaper, or death sentence of an old judge. He stiffened and his color drained.

"Preston, is that you?" He wanted to run, flee the house and never come back.

"Yes father." Gone were the wild eyes of a few hours earlier, replaced with watery scared pupils that darted frantically back and forth. He waited. Finally.

"Come into my room Preston, I want to speak to you." He walked slowly over to the door. It was closed and he turned the handle while pushing the door open. The heavy oak slid forward silently, revealing a bare, dark room.

"Come in Preston!" his father yelled. Shadows flickered off the gloomy walls, rising and falling into specters of seemingly evil and horrible proportions. Preston's throat felt dry and scratchy, making it difficult to swallow. An overhead light shone upon the hardwood floor and Preston followed the glimmer to his father's feet. He looked down at a pair of finely crafted Italian shoes. They rhythmically tapped the floor, counting out the beats to an invisible song. Preston kept his head low, focused on the shoes and the beat they made.

"Preston, I received a call from your school today. The vice principal told me you were causing trouble again. You beat up some boy, caused a big racket right in the school hallway on the first day. Your principal tells me this is not the first time." Silence and then. "Is this how I've raised you? What would your mother think? He turned from the window and looked at his son.

"Preston, I don't like being disturbed when I'm a work, especially by this kind of news. You're going to have to learn to act like a civilized human." His voice was low, controlled, and devoid of emotion. Preston briefly looked up and caught his father's eyes. They were cold and sharp, focused on him. "Do you have anything to say, any excuse or reason for your hooliganism!" Preston remained silent, his gaze held by the fine leather shoes. "I guess not," his father sighed, stepping forward into his son's face. He was a big man Preston had often been reminded of his strength. The son closed his eyes before the first punch landed on his jaw. He staggered back but his father grabbed him, pulled him forward, and punched him slightly below the ear. It was

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useless to resist. He had tried once and his father had only increased the severity of the beating.

"Do you know how disgraceful it is for me to have a son like you? The entire neighborhood must think I'm a laughingstock," Mr. Dregor whispered furiously into his son's bleeding ear. He punched Preston in the stomach, causing the boy to fall on his knees, the sobs echoing around the room. "You're a dog Preston, and if your mother was alive, she'd spit on you and curse the day she gave you life. Worthless trash, worthless trash, worthless trash! he screamed louder and louder, as he kicked and punched and clubbed his son at a faster and more savage pace. At last he staggered back, exhausted, snot running in a swinging line down his nose. Mr. Dregor leaned against the wall panting and examining his son. After a few minutes, he whirled and began to furiously punch the wall behind him until blood ran from the developing hole, down the wall, and into a puddle on the hardwood floor.

"Eileen!" he savagely screamed simultaneously, " how could you have left me, how could you have!"

Preston was oblivious to his father's actions. Through the pain, swollen eyes, and bruised limbs, he groped along the floor and finally out of the room. He pulled himself up, body shuddering with sobs, and slowly worked his way down the stairs. Halfway down, his strength faded, and Preston let himself tumble the last few feet. He ignored the fresh blood and pain, weaved across the kitchen and out the door. Preston knew that his father would kill him if they met within the next twenty four hours. He stumbled away from the front yard, zigzagging down the street, oblivious to the world around him.

Anger. He felt the anger rising within him, blotting out the pain, soothing and cooling his wounds. Amid his anger and tears, Preston collapsed into some shrubbery and felt the world receding. He felt the scraggly branches digging into his cheek before the numbness enveloped him.

Fragments of dreams swirled through his sleep, coming and going, forgotten as soon as they were over. His mother spiraled in front of him. She was smiling and hunched over his first bicycle. No, it had been a red tricycle with streamers and a white triangle emblem on the front.

A shadow upon the ground. His father approached them. Thoughts spinning faster and faster-the bicycle, the trees and grass were gone. They were inside the house, his first house. It was nice and large and beautiful. Preston loved to play under the huge pine tree making mud pies and digging tunnels and trenches in the dirt. He saw his hand move through one tunnel, burying an ant in an avalanche of black.

Screaming, he heard the familiar screaming. Inside the house now. There was a shout, a whack, and more screaming. Crying, Preston was crying, wiping the tears with his dirty filthy fingers and smearing it over his face.

Another scream. "Stop it Richard!" a whack, another whack, another whack. Stumbling and feet running down the hallway. pitter patter and light like his mother's steps. mommy bloody, eyes swollen, skin shredded and torn, clothes ripped. preston crying and mommy hugging.

"shhh, everything will be alright baby, shhh don't cry." in between sobs and gasps for air and wincing of pain. daddy standing there. daddy looking mad. Preston scared of daddy. Don't like daddy.

"i'm leaving richard, to save preston." crying sobbing. preston sobbing and crying. bad and dark and scared.

"i love you eileen, you leave and i'll kill him." daddy looking at him, hate.

still with mommy in different room mommy crying and her arms shaking wildly kiss on the cheek and a "goodbye preston, i love you." more crying and one of mommy's tears on his cheek where was mommy going

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didn't want to be alone.

many round and soft things in mommy's palm swallowed with water curled up on bed with preston in arms preston smiled mommy groans, gasps, eyes role mommy silent growing cold mommy doesn't talk but very cold preston cried scared and alone

crying crying crying

Brightness woke him and Preston thought that it was daylight. Instead, a streetlight loomed over his body, the moths flitting around the orb of intense bright light it cast. He squinted his eyes and brushed a moth away from the corner of his mouth while trying to stare beyond the light. He had stumbled a block away from his house, near where old McCalister had lived. He lifted himself onto his elbows and felt a bubble of pain dislodge itself and move slowly up his spinal cord and to his brain. His eyes throbbed, his lower lip was shredded, and blood spotted the front of his black t-shirt in an almost artistic spiral pattern. He struggled out of the thorns and dragged himself onto the street. The road was empty and he could tell from the sound of the night that it was late.

Preston patted his pocket and felt the reassuring bulk of his knife. It was only a five inch hunting blade, but it was better than nothing and it usually sufficed to get him out of any jams.

So what was he to do know? It was a typical question and one he had asked many times over after one of his father's little episodes. He was fed up with his old man and the beatings. Fuck him, if he wanted to beat anything, let him beat off. Preston grunted at the thought and stared down the street.

He began to walk, a slow, painful shuffling step that made him wince in pain and curse every inch of ground that he covered. His sweaty forehead made him realize how badly he needed a drink. Eventually he reached Wellow Falls Center. He looked up at the renovated clock on the tower and saw that it was four thirty in the morning. Wouldn't be much open at this time. He rested for a moment and then headed down Main Street. The gas station was closed and Demilo's and all of the other shitty little stores were shuttered. People were never there when you needed them. His mouth was sandpaper dry when he reached the railroad tracks. He rested and then crossed them into the woods.

The woods were his territory. He knew them like the palm of his hand. He could follow each of the paths with his eyes closed and he had discovered and built half a dozen hiding places over the years to escape both from his father and from society in general.

"Fuck them all," he whispered feeling a sharp stab in his chest. He walked towards the quarry, taking in the sounds of the forest and letting the chirps and squeaks, the whooshes and the occasional howl loosen and relax him.

He moved silently down one of the paths and came to a large oak tree. He moved to the East side of the tree where he traced the familiar moss down to the leaves and swept them away with his left foot. They lay on top of his stash, and it was a stash that would surprise many in Wellow Falls. Beside the tightly rolled sleeping bag and a few cans of corn and beans, were a stack of books. Each was individually rapped and tightly sealed in plastic bags to prevent moisture of mildew from marring the pages. He pulled out the sleeping bag and unrolled it. The flashlight clicked on and Preston bent over and examined his miniature library. Anna Karenina, The Art of War, Gone With the Wind, and the Lord of the Rings were some of the treasures he examined and passed by before pulling a thick tome labeled Hitler and Stalin and their Life's.

Preston was not the mindless miscreant that Wellow Falls considered him. The town would have been surprised to see him simplify a complex integral or balance a chemical reduction reaction. They would have

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even been more surprised to see his grades - straight A's. But they didn't look, they couldn't look, because to notice his achievement would also be to notice the black welts over his body, the letters from the hospital, or the other countless signs that had been so evident for so long.

He opened to the book mark but his mind wandered to the first grade, to Ms. Jasper. She had been an old fart of a teacher and one day, after his father had really hurt him, she had noticed the marks of his insanity. He remembered her calling him over and asking what had happened and he remembered not wanting to tell her but eventually feeling the trust and crying to her about his father.

The trust had been misplaced. The school had called his father and the old man had explained that his son frequently took accidental spills and that they should but out of family affairs and get lost. The town was afraid of his eccentric father and they never did anything, not a thing. The only thing Preston received was a doubly bad beating and a threat from his father that if he ever told another soul, he send the little boy floating down the Wellow Falls, a corpse. From then on, whenever Ms. Jasper would see the puffy eyes, the swollen bones and torn flesh, she would tell Preston he was excused from recess and that he could sit quietly at his desk if he preferred.

"Sit quietly at my desk," Preston whispered to himself as he smiled and began to read. He read for a few minutes, swatting the mosquitoes as they buzzed around him the flashlight before his eyes became heavy and Preston lay down. In a few minutes he was asleep.

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Chapter 4

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The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

It started as just a whisper. A faint whisper which he thought he was imagining until it became slightly louder and developed into an annoyance. At first he tried to ignore it, but the growing intensity and the repetitiveness of the whisper made him finally take notice.

"Martin, take me in, I have come on a far journey to be with you. To be with you. To be with you." And so it repeated and eventually Martin's conscience began to process the words and his brain sputtered and than coughed to life. The neurons in his brain began to fire again and memories floated by. He remembered pushing his father off the raft down the Cape and running across the lawn at home. The pain of the lawnmower and lying in that hospital bed for what seemed like years. The big chocolate cake he got for his thirteenth birthday, and the last family vacation they had taken to the Grand Canyon.

"Martin, open your eyes." The whisper commanded and very slowly he opened them. They seemed to creak open, like a rusty shutter that has been left in one position for to long. The pain was excruciating when he finally opened them and looked upon total darkness.

"Hello," he whispered, "who's there, where am I?"

"Feel around Martin, use your hands." His hands were at his side and Martin lifted them, wiggling his fingers and thinking that each movement seemed strange and unnatural. He felt smooth wood under and around him. Cloth hung on top of him, and above that the same polished wood. He clutched around in panic, hoping to find some opening, feeling the claustrophobia build within him. With an awkward motion, he tried to kick one of his legs, but his knee hit the wood and it bounced back. It took him only a moment longer to realize he was in a coffin.

"No!" he screamed. "Help me, let me out, I'm not dead! Let me out!" And then the whisper.

"Stop screaming Martin, you're six feet underground. No one can hear you. And even if they did, you are dead." The voice calmed him and he stopped struggling. He remembered the driving, meeting the woman, and then seeing the nail before he imagined it had penetrated his chin.

"Am I in hell?" he asked the voice.

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"Oh no, certainly not hell," chuckled the whisper. He was silent for a moment, trying to divine exactly what was going on. He was in a coffin, there was no doubt about that. It was deathly quiet and he waited to hear the voice again. Who was it?

"Who are you?" he asked timidly, almost afraid to find out who was locked in the coffin with him. There was no reply and Martin felt something cold pass through his body. Finally, a reply.

"I am Collaq. For the time being let's say I'm a part of your conscience. A part that entered your body when you died. In a manner of speaking, I'm like a guardian of souls. I offer advice to those who need help in wronging the evils of past lives." Martin was confused.

"Are you here to help me?"

"Absolutely," purred the voice reassuringly. The friendliness and confidence of the voice calmed Martin and the claustrophobia receded slightly. "You see Martin, there are advantages to being dead. You can't be killed, and it offers a unique perspective for looking back on life and deciding who wronged you."

"Why should I feel that I've been wronged."

"Ah Martin, why do you ask such stupid questions? Not even death can correct your feet or take away the insults you experienced from others. I can help you, I want to help you get everything you ever desired." He had heard this language before from the lady in red, from Monarch. He realized in panic that her help had consisted of a nail through the throat. "Calm down Martin. Yes, I'm an associate of Monarch. We work together and I fully intend to keep the promises she made to you. The women, the wealth, the respect, the revenge will all still be yours." He relaxed and decided to give the voice, this Collaq a chance.

"Can you get me out of this coffin."

"Of course," laughed the voice. "You still have to learn the full extent of your new strength and power. With that he began talking and Martin listened. Within an hour he pushed away the last dirt and climbed out of the hole into the cemetery. The moon was full and Martin smiled as he listened to Collaq. He kicked some dirt back into the grave and began to walk in the direction of his old house. Perhaps he finally had found a real friend and perhaps things really were going to be different.

1.3

His walking was strange and took some getting used to. His legs were rubbery at first, like they had fallen asleep and needed intense physical exertion to get the blood flowing. Martin realized that there was no blood to flow. He dimly recognized that his body lived by other means, means which he did not understand and which he had no real desire to examine. With each step he was able to re coordinate his body and adjust to the new forces which propelled him. His newfound existence did not eliminate the limp and he continued to drag his left foot. At the beginning the drag was especially bad, but this also improved as his muscles adjusted and he regained his corporeal fluidity.

Beyond his sense of balance and coordination, his other senses seemed to have changed. It was difficult to pinpoint, but objects did not look as solid or substantial. The trees and grass held an almost translucent quality and Martin thought he could see through them. At the same time, he caught vibrations and currents that he had never noticed before. They were elusive and although he strained to see whatever he sensed, they refused to be caught and existed more as impulses than as concrete phenomenon.

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He wasn't sure what to think of these changes. Part of him was excited that he had been reborn different and hopefully without his past deficiencies. It was tempted by what the Collaq had to offer and looked forward to the adventures that lay ahead. The majority of him was petrified and confused. He was dead and the Collaq was partially responsible. His new senses and body feeling were alien and seemed to come from outside of him. As his perceptions slowly changed, Martin realized he was not himself and never would be again.

"Martin," whispered the Collaq as if sensing his doubts, "do not be afraid. Change is always difficult. Accept and you will be better for it." Martin looked at himself in the moonlight.

"Accept what," he whispered to the voice in his head, "that I'm dead and yet I'm still alive. I'm still not sure what to think."

"Trust me Martin, just let me show you what we can do." The Collaq seemed to be in his head, able to read his thoughts. Where had he, it, come from and why had it chosen him?

"I've come from far away to help you Martin," replied the voice. "Trust me."

Martin stopped in front of the familiar blinking lights at the intersection near the grocery store. The tiny center was empty and it reminded him of the night not so long ago when he had stopped on this empty street for a beautiful woman dressed in red. He watched the lights blink for a moment and then took a left onto his street.

It was quiet and a gentle wind rustled the trees. Houses had lights on and Martin could imagine the activity that was going on behind the walls and doors. Children playing and adults talking and laughing. It was all so peaceful and tranquil now, and yet it had never seemed to be in the past. The street and the houses had all represented a normalcy he could never achieve because of his foot.

"Do you remember the accident," Collaq asked him as Martin stopped in front of his house. Flowers lay on the front door and a black ribbon was wrapped around the lamp post in the front yard. His father's car was parked in the driveway and Martin could see the flickering of a television set in his parents bedroom.

He stared at his house for what seemed like hours before the voice spoke again.

"It's your house Martin." He didn't answer but wanted to run inside and hug his mother and tell her that he was fine and living. Although he wasn't living. He had died and while standing in front of his house he had noticed the gruesome fact that the nail which had killed him was still embedded under his chin. There was a patch of skin covering it, but when he felt along his jawline, he could feel the hard smoothness of the silver. It had horrified him and he had nearly lost whatever was left of his self control. Once again the Collaq had calmed him and pushed back the waves of babbling voices which he felt clouding his head. They were all his own voice, screaming, yelling, giving him a message he couldn't hear.

"Martin, don't be a fool. The nail is the source of your strength. It feeds you and keeps the power growing inside of you. Does it hurt?" It didn't. It was like a pair of orthodontic braces that had hurt when he first put them on, but had become unobtrusive after the initial period of adjustment. "If it doesn't hurt, why worry about it. Plenty of other things have hurt you more without giving anything in return." The voice was always pointing this out, always mentioning things from his past and Martin wasn't sure what to think. He tried to ignore the voice, but now as he stood in front of his own house he could do so no longer.

The Collaq was speaking softly, intensely, enunciating every word and letting Martin absorb the true meaning of his words.

"No, I won't hurt them."

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"Hurt them, who said anything about that Martin."

"Make them like yourself. Strong and proud, afraid of nothing, not even death. Not everyone can attain what you have Martin. It takes a special person, a special existence. Do not hurt your parents, offer them a chance to fulfill their dreams. It wouldn't be hurting them. You would be giving them the greatest repayment and love you could ever bestow."

"No, I won't do it." He clutched his temple and shook his head violently in an attempt to dislodge the voice. The Collaq's voice became sterner and more insistent.

"You can't get rid of me Martin. I'm part of you now. You made your decision when you picked up Monarch and now there is no going back. You will go inside and visit your parents, I insist." He banged his fist against his head and stumbled onto the front lawn of his house. Martin fell to his knees next to the spout of a water sprinkler he had often played in as a small boy.

"Go away!"

"Were your parents that nice to you Martin. Were they!" yelled the voice. "How did you get that leg Stumpy? What happened?"

"It wasn't his fault!"

"No of course not." As much as he fought it, Martin could not prevent the memory from returning. He had dreamt about the moment a hundred times over as a little boy. "No, please stop!"

His father was mowing the lawn and he was crawling out of the sandbox. He remembered a dim thought in his childish mind. The desire to get to the steps which lay across the green carpet. The loud noise was simply a distraction which daddy controlled and kept safe. He walked a few steps, fell, picked himself up, and then walked a few more steps. The noise was getting louder but he ignored it. He wanted to get to the steps and crawl up on them. That would show mommy and daddy that he was a big boy. He took another few steps and the noise was louder. He looked up into the sky and saw the blueness and the trail of white. A small speck moved next to the white, cutting across the crisp blueness. It moved slowly and his young eyes followed it in fascination. His attention abruptly changed and he focused on the steps again. The buzz had become louder, almost a roar but daddy was there to protect him from everything. He moved his arms forward and suddenly the buzz was on top of him. For an instant the blood in his small body seemed to boil and as fast as he could move his small head, he looked up to see a big object to his side. It loomed over him and on top was his daddy, smiling and staring in another direction. A wail escaped his petrified lips but it was drowned in the roar of machine. It past over him and he watched it move away. Relief and then an incredible pain in his foot that overwhelmed his small senses and consumed the small fragments of thought in his mind. Gone were any thoughts about the steps or curiosity about the speck flying high above him. He turned his head for a moment and saw little pink carrots lying in a red puddle. The red was receding into the ground. The last thing he could remember was the yelling of his daddy's voice.

"Oh my God! Martin, Martin, what have I done, I was just daydreaming for a second! Oh my God!"

"Martin, Martin, you do remember don't you." It was a soft patient whisper that demanded a response.

"Yes," he groaned. He remembered the moment. He also remembered the anger he had always felt against his father for that happy look on his face the second before the accident. He had trusted his father and that trust had made him a cripple. So what if he had been lavished with love and sorrow after the accident? It hadn't regenerated his toes or dampened the ridicule he had suffered from the other kids. His entire life had been

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changed because his father had been daydreaming on top of a lawnmower for a few seconds. Daydreaming about what? About what? he suddenly wondered.

"Pity." Yes, he had hated his parents pity.

"Limpy."

"Yes, Limpy. That's what they all called me," he whispered softly.

"It's time to end the pity Martin. Take the first step." Thoughts and feelings rumbled through his brain, guided and goaded by the voice in his head called the Collaq. He didn't want to hurt anyone, especially not his parents but the feelings were so strong. He had suffered so much because of them and the countless others. "You remember the carbon paper Martin, don't you? You remember Preston Dregor don't you. Begin the journey." His hands shaking, he plunged them into the soft loam in front of his house. The soil and rocks scratched his skin and became embedded under his finger nails. Tenaciously, he burrowed down with his fingers until his forearms were submerged under the earth.

"Feel the power Martin. Surrender yourself to the impulses, to the desire to be strong." Images flashed through his head. He saw his father's smile and the leering of the other students. Past images began to meld with his dark fantasies and a deep reserve of hope and anger began to slowly unwind within him. Images he would never have allowed out of his subconscious began to form and goad his fingers every more frantically downward. He imaged Kathy kneeling naked before him, her berates jiggling as she worshipped him as her master. He saw Preston Dregor nailed to a telephone post, his face contorted into a sick imitation of his old grimace by the pain which he had endured.

There was a tug under his chin and Martin could feel a warmth begin to travel down his neck and across both shoulders. His dead nerves popped back into an imitation of life and he felt an incredible exhilaration take hold. The warmth spread down his arms, caressing his elbow and making the two holes where his hands were buried glow. The warmth reached his fingers and he wiggled them. As he did, he could feel the dirt, rocks, and minerals at his fingertips begin to coalesce like electrons being attracted to a charged pole. Martin felt like he was summoning the power of the earth and he could hear the Collaq inside of him howl with delight.

"Feel the power Martin! It is yours!" The heat began to fade and the glowing slowly subsided. Martin breathed deeply and retracted his arms from the ground. The dirt crumbled into the hole and his hands emerged. His fingers were clasped around two shiny nails.

"It's time to begin Martin."

"Yes," he mumbled still drunk from the power and the images. "Yes."

He stood on the ledge before the front door and watched the shadows from an occasional head light pass across the wooden surface. The glimmer rose above the middle of the door and then faded as the car moved away and the light passed. Tentatively, he reached out and turned the knob. It was locked. He exerted some pressure and the handle snapped and then turned. His strength had definitely increased and he sensed that it was still growing. The light was on in the foyer and he walked in.

His motion was still disjointed and he clumsily made his way across the front hall and into the dining room to the right. It was exactly as he remembered it except for the hundreds of flowers that littered the dining room table. He walked slowly over and picked a card from a bouquet of daisies.

"Dear Marge and Jim,

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Words can't express how we feel about your loss. Please let us know if there is anything we can do. May God be with you.

Love,

Hal, Linda, and Michael

He read a few others and they were the same. Cards from people who had feigned friendliness, but who in reality just pitied him. He could remember the stares he would get as he limped down the sidewalk or across the parking lot of the supermarket. Pity, just a lot of pity hidden in sweat words and pretty cards. He wanted to wipe them off the table but instead he walked forward and dimly heard the television coming from upstairs. Ordinarily, he would not have heard a sound, but in his new state his senses had become more accurate. His vision was almost infrared, and he had been able to pick out the outlines of shapes as he made his way home in the dark. His hearing also seemed to have improved.

His parents were watching David Letterman as they did almost every night before they went to bed. He walked up the stairs and heard the popular late night celerity discussing license plates.

"I was riding through New Hampshire and I happened to pay attention to the saying on the license plates their. Much more original than New York's. They say 'Live Free or Die.' What I wondered is how do the inmates in the New Hampshire prison's feel as they toil making these things? Live Free or Die."

He reached the top of the stairs and walked forward. The floor shifted under his weight and groaned loudly.

"Is someone there?" he heard his mother whispered to his father.

"Sssh, there is no one there. it's nerves, try to relax." He took another step forward and held up the two nails. His parents voices had sounded so nice and comforting. He was home.

"Mother, Father," he said, walking into the room. Their heads moved in unison and he watched his mother reel back in disbelief. His fathers words were stilted and garbled.

"Martin," the word sounded like a 45 record played at 32 rpm's. "Martin is that you?"

"Oh my God, it's my baby, I knew it had to be a mistake, oh my baby come over here!" His mother began to sob. His father stared at him in disbelief.

"How can this be? I saw you buried Martin, I threw dirt on your grave? How can this be?"

"A mistake father, a simple mistake. Just like the mistake you made running over my foot with the lawnmower. Aren't you glad to see me?" What was he saying! He wanted to run over and hug his parents and tell them how much he loved them. But the anger inside his body overwhelmed his judgment. He watched himself talk and behave as if an a trance, his language and movement alien to him.

"Oh Martin," groaned his mother as she rose from the bed. "Please forgive us, can you ever forgive us. You left in the car and they found you dead, a nail in your chin, oh my baby, I knew it had to be a mistake." She reached out and touched his hand, not noticing that it held a nail or that his skin was cold and had become rough in texture. She caressed his palm as tears rolled down her face and onto the pants of the black suit he had been buried in.

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"Martin, I've never forgiven myself, you can believe me. I'll never let myself forget what I did to you." He walked away from his mother and stood in front of his father. Father, I want you to remember what you did for a long time. He held up one of the nails and his father stared at it in confusion.

"What's that Martin?"

"It's both an end and a beginning. This will settle all debts father. But before that, I want to know one thing.

"Stop it!" his mother screamed in agony.

"I want to know what you were daydreaming on the lawnmower that day." His father looked at him dumb struck.

"Father, answer me!" he hissed, holding the nail to his stubbled chin.

"Please, I don't know, I don't remember."

"Think father, think hard." Martin could sense that the Colla was listening, more than a little curious to hear the answer.

"I don't know." Martin flicked the needle and a trickle of blood erupted from his father's neck.

"For the last time, think!" He looked pathetic, bunched into the covers, shivering like a little baby. His father stammered a few words, stopped, and then continued.

"I think I was dreaming that I had more money to buy a bigger house. I think that was it. I was never happy with what we had and though we should have something better..."

Martin tried to pull his hand back but the anger pushed it forward. With his new found strength he drilled it through his fathers chin. His father lurched forward and his body spasmed for a moment before his arms rose to his chin in an effort to dislodge the foreign object. He looked into Martin's eyes and then collapsed back onto his pillow.

His mother said nothing as she watched the blood flow across the white sheets, soaking into the creases and folds in the bed.

"Thank you father, we're even."

"Martin, Martin," his mother stammered, unable to articulate her next thoughts. He walked over to her and he hesitated.

"It must be done Martin. You've already started and it would be a waste to stop. She will not die, but join us. Finish the deed Martin." The veins in his arm bulged and his fingers twitched.

"Mother," a lost part of him sighed in sorrow. The nail came down and his mother did not even attempt to resist. She stared into his eyes as the silver penetrated under her chin. She swallowed once or twice and then fell back onto the pillow.

"Martin, it has begun, do you feel the power. Feel it. This is the place. Very soon you will have more of everything you ever desired in your wildest dreams." Through his deep sorrow and grief Martin could feel the energy that the voice spoke about. It twisted and turned through his veins even as the blood slowed to a trickle

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from his mother's chin. Still, the energy was not powerful enough to prevent him from falling on his knees and banging the bed.

"Mother, Father!" he screamed in agony, "what have I done!"

Chapter 5

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Preston comes face-to-face with the new evil that is consuming Wellow Falls. Through his dreams he also gets a first glimpse of where "they" come from.

Preston marked the spot in the book and noticed that he had been able to read several hundred pages in the last two days. He had done precious little other than read, eat an occasional cold can of beans, and take a short walk through the woods. The book was involving and Preston found the reading and the relaxation was soothing to both his battered mind and body.

The weather had been warm and other than a few mosquito bites Preston found himself in relatively good shape. He stretched and let the crisp fall air fill his lungs. He would be done with the book in a couple of days and then he would venture back into the real world. Perhaps he would return home, perhaps he would just steal a car and drive. To where, he wondered? It didn't really matter, anywhere was better than Wellow Falls. His thoughts turned to the hypocrisy and the beatings before he yanked his thoughts away from such useless musings and turned back to the book. He read another sixteen pages, swatted a mosquito, and then felt his eyes growing heavy.

"To achieve this, the Germans must conquer a new German empire which would dominate the European continent. This pointed to a foreign policy that went far beyond the demands for the revision of the Treaty of Versailles...and became a full-blooded policy of acquiring Lebensraum (living space)..."

These were the last words he read before sleep overcame him in the Wellow Falls woods.

There was unusual movement in the woods and Preston sensed it. His eyes flickered open, cold and calculating, his senses coming alert and probing the surrounding environment. A rustle could be heard in the undergrowth, almost like the whoosh of the wind but different in its oscillations. It rose and fell, rose and fell, like footsteps, heavy tramping footsteps. Preston had long ago memorized the sounds and feel of the woods and he knew that someone was very close.

Stealthily, without making a noise, Preston wriggled out of his sleeping bag and withdrew his knife. Heart and mind were awake, pounding with adrenaline and excitement and a cold fury at having been disturbed in his retreat. Using the moon's light, Preston crept forward, away from the large tree and towards the sound. He moved and tread like a shadow, blending into the heavy silence of the woods. He could clearly hear heavy, clumsy footsteps now and the carelessness of the intruder doubled his fury. The cracking underbrush stopped and Preston slinked around the base of another tree. He felt the bark and sap under his fingers and he closed his eyes to magnify his other senses. A thick stench, like that of sewerage, or of a decomposing animal mingled with the smells of damp earth and aged wood, assailed his olfactory sense. He grimaced, opened his eyes, and stepped around the tree.

Standing in the middle of the brambles with arms to his side and a slightly confused look on his face was the nerd that Preston had beaten up just a day earlier. He looked at Preston and then whispered something that Preston could barely hear.

"No, please...can't do it..."

Monarch

"Did you say something nerd. My god your a damn foolish kid coming here in the middle of the night." Preston remembered every blow his father had dealt as punishment for smearing carbon paper over the kid's face and he clenched his fists. His visit was like a manna from heaven and he was going to pay the beatings back and more. The little nerd continued to stand in front of him mumbling to himself.

"not a killer...I know, I know, it was promised but I don't want it anymore..." The boy's eyes seemed to roll back for a second and he spoke.

"Preston, run, please run, my mother and father. Run before I give in." He sobbed and Preston took a step forward.

"I'm not running anywhere you half twit moron. You should have learned your lesson Limpy." The eyes rolled some more and then the body began to shake as if some kind of internal battle was being waged between the eyeballs and the brain. There were more utterings, a gasp, and then a small smile. The boy's head dropped.

"Perhaps you are right, nothing but cruelty." Preston unsheathed his knife and the little boy fell to his knees. The boy stopped trembling and he raised his head to look at Preston. There was a leering smile on his face.

"Oh I've learned my lesson Preston. And I have you to thank for it." He rose slowly to his feet and advanced towards the bully.

"You see Preston, starting today, things are going to be a little bit different. I have a friend, and my friend tells me that you are no longer the bully in town, the one calling the shots, the big, mean honcho. As a matter of fact, my friend tells me that you're only what I want you to be. Wormfood, personal slave, slop boy, what will it be good old Preston boy?" The little dweeb began to dance around in a spasm of self adulation like a little faire elf.

"Oh you're dead," Preston hissed pointing his knife and thrusting with fury. There was a red sizzle near the boy's pointer finger, like the crackle of electricity which jumped across the space dividing them and landed on Preston hand. It seared and he dropped the knife. The energy danced over the silver metal before fizzling out and disappearing into the ground.

"What the..?" Preston took a step back and dimly heard a giggle.

"Just a little trick Preston, just the beginning of bigger things to come for you, Wellow Falls, and everything and everyone else. You see, it's been promised to me, all of it has been promised to me." For an instant Preston felt confusion and then his mind told him to run. Pride and fury dragged at his feet, but Preston's rationality was too strong and he leapt for the forest. The woods came to life at his call, showing him paths and its secrets as he escaped through it. From behind came incessant raving.

"Run all you want Preston! Run to the ends of the earth but I'll still be here! I've seen your destiny, and it is mine. I hold it in the palm of my hand!" Giggling reverberated through the forest and a sweat broke out on Preston's forehead. His lungs ached but he forgot the exhaustion and continued running.

He came to Vineyard Meadow, a flat grassy triangular area where he had played as a kid. He crouched in a familiar hollow hidden by tall strands of grass and groped in the sand until he found a large rock. A dark shadow plunged out of the forest and into the moonlight.

"Come on you little fucker, just a little closer."

Preston comes face-to-face with the new evil that is consuming Wellow Falls. Through his dreams ~~he~~ also ge

Monarch

"You are..." Which was cut off as the dark shadow plunged out of the forest and Preston slammed the rock into his back. There was a thump and the body disappeared into the tall grasses. A breeze blew the leaves and Preston bent over in exhaustion. He felt the adrenaline coursing through his body and could feel the sweat popping out on his arms and back. The bark of a dog echoed through the woods and Preston watched the tall grass. A minute passed and he slowly and cautiously crept forward. Finally, a little giggle.

"It's going to take more than a rock Preston, more than a rock. I've seen it all, I've seen you and what happens to you, my friend showed me. Your floating motionless, dead, on a sea of water. He says our destinies are linked, became linked from the moment we met." Another little giggle and then a fainter whisper. "Do you believe in destiny Preston. I'm going to help you avoid it all Preston, to become one of us. There is so much you have never seen." The grasses rustled and Martin rose. Where the rock had smashed his chest was a dark liquid like a skin that seemed to pulse over the wound like an external set of nicotine tarred lungs. The smell was putrid.

"Look what I've become Preston, invincible, powerful beyond my wildest dreams. My friend says I can have everything I've wanted. Come Preston, come to me and you can have it. Come to me." Martin smiled and Preston could sense the new power which gave this boy the confidence to make such an overture. It was revenge the small boy sought, the desire to see Preston grovel and beg, to plead for mercy from whatever power now controlled this nightmarish figure in front of him.

Of course he was dreaming. It had to be a dream because limping geeks did not suddenly spurt red electricity from their fingers and heal with black, oozing, breathing, moldy scabs. Except that it wasn't a dream and Preston knew it. The ground he stood on, the breeze, the boy in front of him were real and Preston realized that some portion of reality had buckled. The little boy stuck out his hand.

"Come to me Preston," he said like a father talking to a naughty son and Preston's anger exploded.

"You can shine and spit, polish and work, but when it all comes down to it, your still a loser Limpy. A lousy, little, faire of a loser." The nerd smiled and reached into his back pocket, pulling out a silver object. Preston's mind told him to run, but his pride made him stand his ground.

"Have it your way." There was a lunge and the silver object shot towards him. Preston tried unsuccessfully to lurch out of the way and he felt cold metal cut effortlessly through the middle finger on his right hand as blood spurted wildly from the wound. The digit bounced into the tall grasses. He looked at the grinning little boy in shock and staggered backwards before another blow could be delivered. He collapsed, rolled down a small hill, and could hear Limpy thrashing through the grass looking for him. In an attempt to stem the flow of blood, Preston pushed the wound into his other hand and scampered through the tall grass into the surrounding woods. He could hear the giggling in the distance. The pain was incredible and he could feel the warm blood flowing from between his clenched fist.

He staggered down a familiar path and rested against a large rock. The blood had stained his clothes and he could feel his body tiring and weakening. In the distance, he heard feet moving, reaching the edge of the glade and starting down the path.

He needed to reach the gulch, it was his only hope of escaping the little terror. Motivated by determination and hate, Preston's eyes remained clear and focused, intent on seeing their master through his difficult plight. He ran on, his legs beginning to feel loose and rubbery, his vision narrowing as large black spots began to mushroom around his vision. The sounds of the forest began to recede and Preston heard his own breathing, loud and labored, anxious and desperate.

Preston comes face-to-face with the new evil that is consuming Wellow Falls. Through his dreams ~~22~~ also ge

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At last Preston reached the gulch, a long crag in the earth which had once been mined for granite as part of the Wellow Falls quarry. It stretched hundreds of feet in both directions and provided a barrier between two halves of the woods. Going around would take a considerable amount of time. A hundred feet down was a shallow puddle of water and the rusted remnants of the mining companies long disused machinery. The only way across was a narrow plank about ten feet long, which the local kids maintained as a shortcut through the woods. The giggles were nearly upon him when Preston dashed across the gorge and kicked the plank away. He heard the slight whoosh as it sailed down, end over end, and then a muffled splash as the sound of its landing reverberated up the granite sides.

Martin emerged from the woods, limped over to the edge and looked at Preston.

Their gazes met and Preston realized it was life and death. The games he had played as a bully were over. Whatever buckle had occurred in reality it was deadly serious, and it would claim the lives or the souls, or the bodies of one of them.

"You're not alive," he whispered.

"More so than ever." The boy's smell, the heat which radiated off his young face, and the blood loss made Preston nauseous and he backed away.

"This isn't over Limpy, not by a long shot." Martin leered at him and gave him the finger.

"Pretty hard to do that now, isn't it Preston? You have no idea what's in store for you. You're nothing but a tool Preston, a vessel. Remember that." Preston turned his back and staggered away. Humiliation made his eyes water. Nothing in his life had ever beaten him so badly and the humiliation almost made him want to die.

Fury lashed him forward, it propelled his legs and kept his brain functioning. The anger rose and filled his veins like an elixir and he swore vengeance on Martin and whatever force propelled him.

He emerged from the woods and stumbled towards Wellow Falls center. His right hand and pants were drenched in blood and the black splotches were expanding, getting larger and beginning to blot out the world. The streets were dark, despite the lights and shadows which fluttered across the pavement. They began to merge with the black splotches and Preston stumbled and fell to his knees. He groped at a post, smearing blood all over the wrought iron, and staggered back to his feet. He stumbled into the center, unsure of where he was or where he was going. He started down Nestle Street and collapsed again on top of a manhole cover. He felt the cold metal below him and he heard a hollow sound, like the sucking of a vacuum cleaner.

"No," he mumbled, "no," and he slowly rose to his feet. The Ame's house was vacant. They had moved; Preston remembered seeing the For Sale sign on the house just a week ago. A warm breeze skittered some dirt and he shivered as goose bumps began to ripple up and down his arms and legs. Clenching his teeth to ignore the constantly swelling pain, and with some last remnant of strength, Preston lumbered unsteadily for another block until he reached a large white colonial house. He collapsed against the siding to steady himself, and left a long red streak across several rows of shingles. Slowly, while the pain continued to grow and the black splotches consumed his conscience, Preston inched over to the basement window and kicked the glass in with his boot. He fell onto the ground, cleared the shards away as best he could with his sleeve and then wormed his way through the small window. Preston fell four feet from the window to the basement floor, groaned once, and then looked up at the ceiling.

The hollow sucking sound grew louder and Preston could not fight its approach any longer. He felt a spit bubble rise from his lips and pop before the darkness became complete.

Preston comes face-to-face with the new evil that is consuming Wellow Falls. Through his dreams ~~20~~ also ge

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There was blackness for awhile and then vaguely, in the distance, Preston heard the sucking sound. It seemed to gather the folds of darkness about it, to twist and turn and Preston felt himself being drawn towards it. He tried to move his body but it was lead, weighted down and immobile, prostrate in front of the sound that was forming and taking shape around him. It grew and grew and finally Preston realized it was death. It was his life force being drawn away and dispersed - entropy.

"Nooooo!" his terrorized mind thought but still the sound grew louder and now the blackness became a tunnel through which he was falling. "Nooooo!" he continued to scream before the world erupted red and the blackness flew apart into a thousand pieces. For an instant, he saw a woman in a blue cape looking at him and then she was gone.

His eyes burst open and there was a girl standing over him. She held his hands and where their fingers met was a red sullen glow. He watched in disbelief as the flesh of the severed finger knitted itself. He looked back to her face and she smiled kindly at him.

"What is this?" was the only thing he could whisper before he collapsed back onto the pillow and returned to the darkness.

The hollow sound was back, although this time its quality was different, less urgent and menacing. It reminded Preston of his father raising a conch shell to his ear and telling him to listen. It had been on one of the better days of their relationship.

"Can you hear the ocean Preston. It's magic, the ocean is trapped inside of this shell." The sound tugged at him and Preston followed it, trying to make something tangible out of the low groans and elusive cries. Slowly, he was able to pull the hollowness together and give it shape.

He was over an ocean. And as he looked the ocean began to speed by below him. He could see the waves and an occasional small atoll. He flew across the miles, expectant and waiting, but for what he could not be sure.

Finally, he saw land. There was a long sandy beach and behind it were high cliffs that rose almost perpendicularly to form the edge of a dense jungle. He flew by and realized it was an island. Not alone, but one island of five. In the middle was a larger island, with a huge set of mountains in the North and a vast plain in the south extending to the middle area.

There was a tug as he moved towards it. His momentum slowed and he saw the ocean churning below him. He continued ahead and now there was a more violent tug that nearly sent his view spiraling into the blue ocean. The waves looked large and Preston realized he was falling. He saw the swell of the sea, the white foam of the stormy ocean, and the speckles of sea weed and ocean growth. The island loomed before him but there was another tug and now he plummeted down like a flying ace shot from the sky. As he plunged, his stomach rose. The air rushed out of his lungs and his stomach heaved as the ocean grew closer. Preston screamed....

...and bolted upright.

Chapter 6

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The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

He heaved for breathe and could still feel his body falling. He looked around. White walls, wooden floor upon which he lay, and a doorway leading into another room. Next to him was the girl.

"Not so tough and mean anymore," she said.

"What's that?"

"I said your not that tough and mean anymore. I saw you the other day. You looked terrible, savage, and now, you're not so tough and mean." He felt his pulse slowing and smiled.

"One less finger doesn't make much of a difference. I could hurt you just as easily."

"True." She put the heal of her foot on his stomach and Preston bit his lip. "But you won't." He grabbed her foot.

"Why won't I?"

"I saved your life, healed your finger, you owe me that much." He nodded his head, tiring of her tart little words.

"I didn't ask for help, and I don't owe you anything." Talking was painful and he changed the subject.

"Do you have any water?" he croaked. His voice was raspy and feeble and he hated the weight of her foot on his belly. He wanted to grab it and twist her around but with great difficulty he restrained himself. He curled his damaged finger into a ball and tucked them under his shirt to hide his wound. She stared at him for a minute and he asked again.

"Hey, you, please, do you have anything to drink, any water." She silently rose to her feet and walked to the kitchen. She poured a glass of water and sat beside him. Furiously, Preston realized he couldn't raise the glass of water to his lips. His arms felt like jello, and he tried futilely to push it up his chest and towards his face.

"It bothers you doesn't it, it hurts that you have to rely on me?" He closed his eyes and said nothing. She disappeared and returned with a few pillows. After she had propped him up, she grabbed the glass from his

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hand, brought it to his lips and tilted it. The water poured smoothly and he hungrily sipped at the liquid. He pulled his face away and several drops of water dribbled down his chin, looking like drool. She mopped it up using one of the bloodstained towels. They sat in silence for a minute and he looked her over. She was pretty with dark hair and eyes and a well proportioned body. Nice breasts and ass. Her dress was plain and conservative, a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt with a red vest on top of it. He was sure he had never seen her before.

He broke the silence.

"Can I ask who you are and where I am?"

"I'm Ryan and you're in my house."

"Well that's a great answer. Is this supposed to be some type of mystery game? You hold me hostage until I do you some favor or complete some perverted task."

"That's good, you're imaginative."

"Fuck you," he said sullenly.

"This is the Ames' house," he guessed.

"Yes, I found you in my basement." He vaguely remembered smashing the window. "I could have called the police and reported you as a vagrant."

"Why didn't you."

"You're finger. You would have died if I had waited for the police or if I had been nice enough to call an ambulance. You were lucky I found you when I did." He thought it had been a dream but now Preston remembered the red glow and the miraculous healing of his fingers. He wasn't sure how to proceed.

"Exactly how did you heal me?" She shrugged.

"I'm not really sure." She changed the subject. "That poor kid you beat up last week, did you kill him?" He looked at her and the memories became a confused jumble. The smearing of the carbon paper, the chase through the woods, the days spent in the forest all became a surreal series of events.

"No, I didn't kill him. He..." and he stopped himself from telling this stranger about how his finger had been lost. "Dead, when was he found dead?"

"The night after you stenciled his face."

"Your a liar, I saw him the woods last night, alive."

"Suit yourself; you were a suspect until someone said they saw you wandering around in the woods that night. But he's dead, I'm not lying." Dead, how could the little dweeb be dead? Different perhaps, high on some new narcotic, but dead? Dead little boys didn't go running through the woods with big silver nails in their hands. He looked at his missing finger as proof that he was somewhat sane. Had Martin been a dream? Had he lost his finger some other way? He remembered looking at Martin from across the ledge and it had occurred to him that the boy was not alive, that he was somehow supernatural. Now, the idea seemed silly and preposterous. But was it? She saw him examining the missing digit.

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"What happened, how did you lose it?"

"That's my business," he said defensively as Preston's confusion grew. It was her fault. She was working with the little nerd, trying to not only kill him but ensure that he was thoroughly humiliated.

"What do you have going with that little nerd?" Preston demanded grabbing her shirt and pulling her towards him. She didn't recoil but met his gaze straight on.

"You're going to have to figure that out for yourself. But let me tell you something. I know you think you're the biggest baddest man around. I've seen you walking around like you own the world and every living creature on it. Well Mr. Bully, if you want, I can call the hospital right now and have them pick you up. Should I do that? And then you can answer all of their questions and not have to deal with me." His father would be notified if he was in the hospital. He didn't say anything.

"What happened to your hand?" she persisted.

"Did you hear what I said!" he screamed in fury. The exertion tired Preston and he collapsed back onto the pillows. "I really appreciate what you've done, I really do, but I'm tired and I need to sleep now." His words blurred and his breathing slowed. "This must be a dream anyway, maybe I'm dead," he whispered before his eyes closed and he sank into the pillow.

His life had always had an intrinsic order to it. Yes, his father had beaten him, but deep inside Preston knew there was a reason. That didn't make it better or right, but it explained it. The same was true for his disposition. He accepted the rage that he felt and could not control. It too had its roots in feelings and it also had an explanation. But the Nerd and this girl were different. He could not so easily explain their behavior and it bothered him. It made Preston want to smash his fist through the window or shatter the big bulb which was perched above his head. Because his life had taught him that if he couldn't understand what was going on, he should at least try to smash it. Brute force was sometimes needed. He lay thinking for most of the day as the shadows lengthened and the light began to fade.

He had slept and with the rest his strength had begun to return. At first he had just tried to sit up and when that proved easy he slowly rose to a standing position. His legs were shaky but the groaning in his stomach made him think it was more from a lack of food than anything else. The return of his strength also brought a strong curiosity. He slowly shuffled across the room and through the doorway into the kitchen. Oven, refrigerator, it looked pretty standard. The wallpaper was a crummy yellow and the linoleum needed to be replaced. He poured himself a glass of water and sauntered back from where he had started. It was a living room although it lacked any furniture or decoration. The entire house looked the same. He walked through the kitchen, into a hallway, and through it to the base of stairs. Slowly, he climbed up and rested at the top. The hallway on the second floor was equally sparse. The hardwood floors and the darker colored walls gave it a more somber and eerie look. Preston walked into two empty rooms before he came to a closed door. It opened and he walked into a bedroom. The queen sized bed was the only piece of furniture in the entire house and with that came the realization that Ryan must live alone.

"Alone," he whispered, "is that possible?" As he walked into the room, his finger began to itch. He scratched it and stopped in front of a closet. The itch in his hand had begun to throb and he absently shook his hand to dissipate the pain. He reached out his good hand and grabbed a hold of the brass knob. It turned and Preston heard the lock unlatch, but the door would not open. He pulled with all of his strength but the door refused to yield. The front door opened and Preston froze. He heard her footsteps and then she called out.

"Preston, are you home?" Unsure of whether or not to respond, Preston tiptoed out of the room and into the hallway. The footsteps approached and he heard the stairs creak and groan as she ascended. "Preston are you

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up there?"

"Yes, I'm here," he said realizing she was going to find him anyway. "Where have you been?" he demanded to throw her onto the defensive. She was dressed in jeans with a white short sleeve shirt and a sweater over it. She carried a bag. He tried to relax and not get angry but it was so hard to maintain control.

"Out," she replied curtly, putting down a bag and walking over to him.

"Who do you live with? Where's your furniture? Who the hell are you?" She shrugged her shoulders and Preston grabbed her. "Answer me goddammit, am I going crazy? What the hell is going on!" Silence and then in Preston whispered almost mournfully more to himself than to her:

"I don't understand you. I just can't figure it out."

"I can't figure it out myself so don't feel so bad." He looked at her and then pushed her gently away. "I brought you some things, I hope they'll cheer you up."

"You brought me something?" he asked, wondering why she should be so generous. He had long ago learned that every present had something attached to it. She smiled and Preston had to admit to himself that it was radiant, beautiful and for an instant he forgot the fading throb in his finger and the confusion which seemed to be eroding the stable world he had built for himself. Her hand went into the bag and pulled up some hamburger and a few other grocery items. Preston's stomach flipped and his hunger redoubled.

"Food," he said returning her smile.

"I thought you might be hungry. I also thought you might want to know the latest in Wellow Fall's gossip. I thought it might interest you." She withdrew the paper and he took it from her hands. "Come on, let's go downstairs, I'll cook and you can read."

Preston's hunger nearly became a physical illness as the smell of her cooking wafted throughout the kitchen and house. She expertly chopped the onions and flipped them into the pan. She added a little oil and allowed it to sizzle. When the onions were done, she shook them out and replaced them with the chopped hamburger. He looked at the newspaper and began to read it as she continued with her slicing, dicing, and frying.

The *Wellow Falls Gazette* was not much of a newspaper. It was a ten or eleven page weekly that covered local elderly events, midget baseball games, and the other boring happenings of small town politics. Preston had been featured in the paper twice. The first had been for an incident when he smashed the headlights of every single car in the Brownie & Sons supermarket parking lot. He had been seven at the time. The second article had been about reforming juvenile delinquents. As the town's principal delinquent, his name was prominently mentioned in a side article. It printed his latest exploits which had consisted of switching the paper and glass recycling bags at the collection site, fouling the entire system up for days.

Today the headline of the paper read:

MURDER TRAGEDY DESTROYS LOCAL FAMILY.

He shrugged and saw that she was watching him read. It was written by Luis Sanchez and Preston groaned. He was the local town gossip monger and Luis managed to burrow his way into every small town scandal. Besides, his writing style was annoying.

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"Wellow Falls lies in a state of shock! In the last two days, this small community has witnessed several grisly murders which have shattered the calm of this tranquil town and raised several disturbing and inexplicable questions. On Wednesday, police found local high schooler Martin Hanson dead in his car. He had apparently been stabbed to death and left beside route 1A near the Wellow Falls Dry-cleaning Emporium. Only two days after he was buried by his family and friends, his mother and father, David and Joan Hanson were found dead in their homes, apparently murdered in the same manner as their son. Police have no leads or suspects although they are not ruling out the possibility of a narcotics connection. Perhaps equally disturbing is that Martin Hanson's grave was found opened and his body removed. Once again, police are baffled by these odd turn events.

Although no suspect has been mentioned, police are investigating an altercation between Martin Hanson and Preston Dregor that occurred only hours before the murder. While police decline to comment whether the two events may be related, they have stated that Mr Dregor was spotted at the opposite end of Wellow Falls at the approximate time of the murder.

The Hanson's were known as a friendly, decent family that..."

Preston reread the article and slowly put the newspaper down. He closed his eyes to try to calm the flurry of thoughts and questions that had multiplied in his brain.

"It means something to you, doesn't it? He didn't know how to respond. Confusion. He felt confusion and he wanted to become angry. He clenched his fists and unrealized that this time anger would not solve the problem. It would not explain how a dead boy had chased him through the woods or how this stranger had mysteriously healed his finger. He bludgeoned the anger down and responded.

"Yes, it does mean something." She too was searching for something and that was why she had helped him.

"Did you murder the Hanson boy?"

"Murder!" he roared jumping up from his seat. "I'd like to kill him after this!" he shouted showing her his missing finger. He realized the volume and harshness of his voice and he relaxed. "I didn't do it though. I wanted to, and I could've but I didn't." He covered his stubbled face with his hands. In the silence that followed she scooped the food off the oven and placed it on a plate.

"I don't have a table so you can eat where you're sitting, sorry."

"That's fine." She took a bite and then began to talk.

"I understand the confusion you're going through. I can't tell you the number of times I've found myself in a different town, or the number of houses I have entered and left. My mind and body seem to be searching for something although I have no idea of what that is.

There are spells, or periods of time, or instants when I can't remember anything. When I was young, they almost never came. Some part of me might have sensed them for an instant, like a faint scent in the air, but before I could place the feeling or define it, it's usually gone. I call these periods dark spells and they are becoming more frequent now.

This house, I live alone. I have no recollection of how I arrived, of who bought it, of how I even received the key. One minute I was at home, wherever that was, and the next I was here in Wellow Falls. Throughout my life it has all seemed so natural that I haven't either bothered to question it.

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But I know it's not normal. Normal girls do not live by themselves in houses. Normal girls do not have dark spells and wake up in towns hundreds and even thousands of miles away. My entire existence seems to be locked away in the dark spells." He wasn't sure what to think.

"How did you heal my finger?"

"I don't know." but her face betrayed the lie. It didn't really matter and he let it pass. Maybe he didn't want to know? What was important was that his finger was whole. The hamburger had further re-fortified him and he announced what had been on his mind for the last few minutes. He summoned the politest voice he could and addressed her.

"Ryan, I don't have any answers for you. I can only thank you for the help you've given me. If you did save my life, I'm very grateful. Unfortunately, I must be going."

"Tell me Preston," she pleaded, "tell me what happened. You can trust me." Her neediness made him want to get out as soon as possible. Emotions only led to pain. He had told the old man about things but instead of a pat on the back or a word of advice the bastard had raised his fist and smashed it into his young face.

"No, I'm sorry Ryan. There's nothing to tell. I've got to go. Thanks for dinner and everything else."

"I don't think you're in any condition to leave."

"Thanks mom, I'll remember that." He looked at her for a minute and smiled.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I appreciate your help. A lot of people in this town would have left me to die." It was difficult to say the words and Preston turned his back to her to hide his discomfort.

"Don't die Preston. I'd hate to think that the time I spent to heal you was a complete waste. And don't show up in my basement bloody again, because this was a one shot deal." He couldn't tell if she was serious or not so he just shrugged and said:

"Yeah, right." He turned around, walked through the foyer, and out the front door. The night was pleasantly cool and he breathed a lung full of fresh air. It felt good to be on his own again. He walked to the top of the driveway and looked into the well-lit kitchen.

She was weird, very weird. Con-artist or misfit, liar or weirdo, he couldn't decide. The questions turned and turned in his head and he decided that if he did not give pause and stop thinking about them, they would whirl him into madness. A thought formed:

"Some puzzles can be thought, others can be forced, and yet others must be forgotten, at least for a while." Yeah, that's it he said to himself, just forget her for awhile.

There were a row of rhododendrons at the top of the driveway that were at the peak of their bloom. He walked over to one of the large plants and twisted a flower back and forth until he was able to rip it from the brittle branch. He opened the black mailbox at the top of the driveway gently placed the flower in it. Preston closed the lid and pushed up the mail-marker on the side of the black tin can.

Very weird and appealing. For a minute he considered taking the flower out and throwing it onto the ground. Instead, he pointed his gaze away and headed towards the cemetery. In between strides he massaged the

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stump where his finger had been a few days earlier.

He had an idea of where Martin would be and this time he would not be so unprepared. Because while Ryan sat in her house crying about her dark spells, he was determined to do something about his own problems.

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Chapter 7

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The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds.

Luis Sanchez chewed on his pencil and then threw it against the table. It landed, bounced once, and then rolled off the side and onto the floor.

He looked out his office door and it was dark. His light was usually the only one on at this hour. He worked late because he was used to the big time, to the big cities, where action broke late and newsmen spent their nights prowling the streets looking for real dirt and copy. News was not made during the day. At least not interesting news. Yeah sure, he could always write a story about the latest political bullcrap, or copy the boxscores from last night's baseball game. But that wasn't real news, at least not to Luis. He was interested in the seamy side of humanity. The nitty gritty. He was into the innermost fantasies and secrets of the average Joe Smoe walking down the street. Sure, the guy looks clean cut and average, but if Luis had learned anything, it was that everyone had a dark side. Priests who molested little children, CEO's who sexually harassed their secretaries, and nice teacher's who would prefer to teach children sexual biology than the A's and B's.

Luis was interested in the lurid and the occult and he had found plenty. He had once received a tip about a prominent Boston businessman that was involved in some highly unusual trading. Luis followed him around for a month and eventually wound up at a warehouse. The warehouse was full of beautiful blonde women that the businessman had drugged and caged in advance of their being shipped to the Middle East as sex slaves. From outward appearances, the executive had appeared as an outstanding member of the community. The bust had been big and Luis had spent following month dwelling into the intricacies of the white slave trade.

And then something had happened. He wasn't sure what, but his biggest, most successful coup had somehow become his undoing. Perhaps it was his cockiness and brashness, or his aggressive nature, or perhaps, as he suspected, there was more to the story that led to his demotion and eventual banishment to Wellow Falls.

And so he had come to this small suburb twenty minutes outside of the Big City, population approximately 10,000 people. When he arrived, the first thing he had done was to go to the library and spend the day researching the town. It was his mantra to know the facts, and one of the central facts to any story he would write had to do with the history of where he was.

The history was rather drab. The town had originally been part of a larger neighboring town simply called Falls. As the area began to develop in the 1800's around the time of the civil war, Falls grew in size and eventually its West side seceded. The man who had led the secession was named Steven Wellow and thus, logically enough, the town was renamed Wellow Falls in 1871. Since then it had principally been a conservative, republican, white town - short on crime, and drugs, long on education and normalcy. Besides the Hanson deaths, the only other oddity he could find was a massive power outage that occurred about eighteen years ago. The power outage had no known cause, and for over three hours veiled the town in darkness. As

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mysteriously as it started, the outage was over. A cause had never been found.

There was one little spark of life in the sleepy little village of a town that he lived in. It was a twice a year celebration that occurred at a large resort hotel by the town's lake. The western side of Wellow Falls was bordered by a large spring lake that not only served as the border between the town and its original parent, but that brought substantial revenue. In the days of polio, a Dr. Milton Sagis has built a therapeutic center there. The center, much like FDR's polio recovery facilities down South consisted of a series of large, beautifully decorated buildings. Over time, with the scrounge of polio eliminated, the complex had been turned into the Sagis resort complex. Even before Luis had heard of Wellow Falls, he had heard of the complex. Friends and colleagues had vacationed there and had sworn that the crystal clear water was indeed a needed panacea to the tough modern world.

The resort had an international reputation, and Luis was constantly befuddled that such a sleepy, dead town, was actually home to such a widely known, world class resort. The highlights of the season revolved around opening of the resort on Memorial Day weekend, and the closing of the Sagis Complex on Labor Day for the winter. On those weekends, sleepy Wellow Falls Center woke-up and the streets were congested with cars and taxis, as visitors anxiously made their way towards the complex to participate in the ritual opening or closing festivities.

He had never gone and Luis supposed it was because if he went and enjoyed it, he might be forced into admitting that maybe Wellow Falls wasn't a total hole in the wall.

Even though the resort attracted the high and mighty, the wealthy and the rich, it, like the rest of Wellow Falls seemed to somehow avoid scandal. Wellow Falls did not seem to have any other demons for him to unearth and he had spent the last year writing about a variety of petty crimes. There were no white slavery rings or satanic cults to investigate. The scandalous dirt in the town revolved around which parents had allowed their children to attend the under-age drinking party at the Sprout's house. Ridiculous and utterly demeaning for a professional of his degree. But such were the sacrifices of journalism.

Things had been pretty damn dry, news talk for not much happening, until a few days ago. It changed when the poor Hanson boy had been found dead in his car. Murders didn't happen often in Wellow Falls, and when they did they were big news. Luis had seen plenty of murders, but he had been banished to the sleepy suburb for so long that his pulse actually blipped a beat when he heard about this one. A murder, an actual murder to investigate and write up in the *Wellow Falls Daily Journal*. Just saying it made him want to yawn. Most of the townspeople were aghast, but to Luis, Martin's death was pretty standard stuff compared to some of the things he had seen in the city. It looked like the kid had made the mistake of picking up a hitchhiker and had been paid for the ride with a stab through the chin. Grisly, but effective.

The story didn't get interesting until the following day, when Luis learned that not only had the kid's body been exhumed and stolen, but that his family had been brutally murdered in the same fashion as the son. A town that had been in shock, went catatonic. In two days, a decent family had been wiped off the map. The police didn't know who was responsible, and the force conjured up crazy theories about mafia connections or drug cartels. Please, Luis thought, the mafia and drug cartels wouldn't waste a second in this sleeper of a town. No, Luis sensed something more to this story, something that was beyond the ordinary. Here in Wellow Falls, he sensed that he had stumbled onto something as perverse and occultist as anything he had seen in the big city. After a year's ennui, he was determined not to let the story slip out of his grasp.

Because he had sniffed around for so long, his nose was usually right in sniffing out the trail. He would sense it, follow it, and finally grab it, not letting go until the whole story had spilled its guts and was on the front page. And in this case, his sense told him that the trail could be found at the cemetery. Whoever had taken the poor kid's corpse just might be back for mommy and daddy.

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Luis got up from his desk and bent over to pick up the pencil. As he did, a light went on in the office next to his. He grabbed his jacket and walked out.

"Luis, working late?" The question came from Ramona, an overweight reporter that covered senior citizens events. She was sweet and good for a snack so Luis walked into her office. Predictably, she had a bag of open potato chips on her desk.

"Yeah, just trying to make something happen." Ramona guffawed.

"Keep trying Luis, keep trying. But remember, this isn't the big city."

"Yeah, no kidding," he said while chewing on chips and walking out.

Chapter 8

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Something is happening at the graveyard. What is that scratching sound?

It was only 9:00 pm but the town was characteristically quite. The *Wellow Falls Gazette* was located on Burlap Road, a few blocks from Main street. His car glided past the grocery store and Luis slowed as he passed the DeMilo's pharmacy where the Hansen boy's car had been found. As he left the center of town, he sped up and turned on the radio. He was fiddling with the knobs when something caught his eye and made him slam on the brakes. The back of the car rose, and the front tired jived slightly to the right in protest. His headlights only illuminated the black pavement and the yellow median stripes and he only saw a blur of something disappear into the darkness of the woods.

Raccoon, he thought. "Raccoon," he whispered, realizing that he was really out of shape if a simple murder had put him on edge. As he drove, he thought about cemeteries and how they always seemed to be a focal point of a story, or at least his stories. They were places of beginning and ends. Beginnings, because often the first hint of a story would become evident at a cemetery during a funeral. People sobbed, and cried, and talked. Notes were passed and gossip often followed the body down into the grave. He liked to think that his death would spawn such rumors and gossip, and that perhaps in this way he would outlive his body and actual existence in the world of the living.

They were also ends, and the reason for that was apparent. It was where the body was lowered and the dirt shoveled onto it; where nature waited to lay claim to the elements it had lent out for the briefest period of time; an end to a bargain and a life, a beginning to a fresh chain of rumors and stories, motions and currents in the never-ending flow of life.

Luis rapped the dashboard and told himself to stop getting so philosophical. He could wax poetic about graveyards but he really didn't care for them.

A few minutes later he arrived at the wrought iron gate to the Wellow Falls Cemetery. He drove around about a quarter mile from the entrance and parked his car by the side of the road. In his glove box was a flashlight and a small camera, which he grabbed before exiting the car. He quietly closed the door and crossed the street. He jumped over the short rock wall delineating the cemetery grounds and immediately saw rows of tombstones curling away in all directions. Sighing, he got his bearings and began to walk around the perimeter. He was at home in graveyards and had found the Hanson plot on the Internet, but finding it was not as easy as he had thought it would be.

The only markers in the cemetery were the gravestones, and he had difficulty using them as guideposts. The stones themselves varied like the lives of the people living under them. Some were tall and narrow, arcing towards the heavens, while others were box-like, true mausoleums. Most though, were plain, just what he had always imagined a gravestone should look like. A few had flowers or American flags placed beside them.

He passed through what looked like the older part of the cemetery where the stones were worn by the passing of the years. Luis new that acid rain had probably given the decay process a little bit of help.

The cemetery was quiet although every now and then he would catch movement in the bushes or hear something scampering away. It reassured Luis that at least animals were not scared by the bodies underneath

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them, or deterred by the ghosts which moved unseen through the field.

He may have wandered forever if he hadn't heard another sound. It was a faint scratching, an abrasive sound, like when he cleaned his kitchen sink with cleanser. At first he dismissed it as the animals, but its regularity made him realize it was something else. His pulse quickened as he shut off his flash light and quietly made his way towards it.

He moved back through the old cemetery and towards a newer section. It began to look familiar. He crept quietly along, keeping down so that he wasn't totally visible in the moonlight. Call it superstition, but Luis had learned to be cautious amongst the dead. He patted underneath his left armpit and felt the reassuring bulk of his pistol.

He ducked behind one particularly large stone about twenty yards from the Hanson plot and listened.

He heard the scratching again and then a grating sound, like someone moving the cover of a toilet. He shivered.

It was strange but he could have sworn that he smelled gasoline.

He turned to move closer and that was when a snarling object came flying at him. Luis raised his arms in alarm and staggered backwards. Something hard glanced off his shoulder and smashed into his chest, propelling him off the gravestone and onto the soft ground. His chest ached but he ignored it and watched a figure come out of the darkness.

Luis reached for his gun but his attacker quickly had the tip of a metal shovel against his neck.

"One move and I'll push." As if to stress the point, the attacker applied a little pressure.

"I'm just a reporter. I'm here to get a story. Really. My name is Luis Sanchez. I'm a reporter with the *Wellow Falls Gazette*."

The shovel sliced across his neck opening a slight wound underneath his adam's apple.

He let out a little yelp and felt a trickle of blood make its way down his neck.

"Okay, you're bleeding." The figure removed the shovel and offered Luis a hand. He grabbed it and pulled himself up. Only then did he realize he had been ambushed by Preston Dregor.

His chest was throbbing but that didn't prevent him from unleashing a torrent of fury.

"What the hell did you think you were doing! You could have killed me! I knew you were a screwball, but this is too much! Or were you the killer? I've got reports that you beat the poor kid up the morning before he was found dead! I always thought you should have been one of the suspects!" Preston's eyes were not apologetic, but murderous.

If there was a bad element in Wellow Falls it was Preston Dregor. The boy was by the far the worst bully Luis had ever come across. Burglary, thugary, vagrancy, almost anything bad could be traced to the kid. Luis had heard that his father beat him and would have felt some pity, if the kid just wasn't so mean and angry. You couldn't feel sympathy for someone that was determined to bite the hand that helped.

"Ssshhh, do you want to get us killed," Preston hissed.

Something is happening at the graveyard. What is thatscratching sound?

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"Do you know what's going on here?" The boy's face was impassive and cold.

"You know, it figures that you would have found your way here. It just figures."

"What's that supposed to mean," Luis asked although he had a pretty good idea of what Preston was hinting. He had no problem admitting he liked different types of stories. And if this punk wanted to insinuate he was a tabloid journalist interested in the bizarre and the occult, he could go to hell.

"I don't have time to explain."

"Ah, go to hell Preston." They glowered at each other for a few seconds before Luis realized it was useless to argue with the kid. At the very least, he could use the psycho for some type of cover or protection.

"Do you hear the sound?" he asked Preston.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to see what it is," he said while moving gingerly forward. Preston grabbed his arm and he spun around, thinking another attack was imminent. Instead, he looked like he wanted to tell Luis something. He just said simply:

"Be careful."

"Thanks."

Together, they quietly advanced. There was a slight rise blocking their view of the freshly dug graves. Once they passed it, Luis looked in horror at the source of the scratching sound.

Chapter 9

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Preston grabbed his arm and pulled him down and against one of the tombstones to ensure they would not be seen. From this vantage point, Luis watched the resurrection unfold...

Preston grabbed his arm and pulled him down and against one of the tombstones to ensure they wouldn't be seen. From this vantage point, Luis watched the resurrection unfold.

He had seen something like this once before. When he was young, he had been playing with his cousin in a sandbox behind the house. They had found a big beetle scurrying across the sand and had felt one of those sadistic urges that small children sometimes get. They had buried the beetle and waited to see if it would suffocate or somehow find a way to dig itself out. After about three minutes of gazing at the spot, they saw little twitches which caused the sand grains to cascade down from the mound they had built. The twitches became more violent and little black legs flickered out, disappeared, and then began frantically pushing the sand away. Soon after, the flying sand ceased and the beetle came scurrying out. It stopped in front of them, as if to say: "I know what you did, and I'll be back. You thought you could kill me but I'm not dead and I will get revenge." His cousin seemed unaffected and had raised his booted foot and stomped the beetle back into the ground.

This was like that but on a much larger and more human scale. The ground above the two graves was pulsing back and forth to the rhythm of the grating. Rising in falling, as if the dirt was going to split open at any moment and vomit something to the surface.

"What in God's name," Luis whispered at the sight. Preston just stared. The grating became louder and then finally, like a pregnant flower blossoming in the spring time, the ground in front of one of the tombstones cracked and then parted. There was a cave-in of dirt and then shovel-fulls of sod and grass were hurled out of the pit which had just opened in the ground. Several minutes later the same thing occurred in front of the other grave.

There was more movement and Luis thought he spotted an arm. The dirt continued to spit out of the hole, but now there were flashes of hands and arms. Luis could hear small pebbles striking something hard and metallic at the bottom of the hole. Finally, a pair of fingers emerged and grasped the side of the pit. Luis watched in horror as David Hanson, the man whose bloody corpse he had seen at the morgue, pulled himself from the hole and collapsed onto the ground in front of his own gravestone. He was dressed in the same black suit that Luis had seen on many a dead friend and neighbor before they were lowered into the grave. His tie was ripped and even in the darkness, Luis thought he could see the clumps of dirt sticking to the man's face.

Buried alive? Had he accidentally been buried alive?

The body was motionless for a moment, as if the exertion of digging itself out had proven exhausting. Slowly and cautiously, David Hanson rose to his feet. He took a wobbly step and the motion seemed to stir some disequilibrium in the body because he sank to one knee and nearly fell back into the hole beside him. Once again he rose to his feet and began to slowly and awkwardly shuffle over to his wife's grave.

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Luis had once seen a colt born, and the awkward way in which it had first risen to its feet, shaky and exhausted, reminded him of the movements he was now seeing.

Another set of hands emerged and Luis saw Joan Hanson try to pull herself out. Her head appeared and then she fell back down into the pit. Her husband reached the edge of her grave and all three of them watched, David, Luis, and Preston, as she successfully made another effort to extract herself from death's resting place.

This was no mistake, he realized. One person, perhaps, but two people was not possible. Whatever spectacle they were watching defied any explanation.

Luis put his camera to his eye and began positioned it for the best shot. This would change his career. Not only would he have this strange ritual on film, but Preston was a witness who could corroborate the story. It was almost too good to be true.

Before he could take the picture Preston swatted the camera out of his hands.

"Are you crazy?" Preston hissed at him again. "Do you want them to realize we're watching?" Before he could reply that he really didn't give a damn, he heard another voice behind them.

"It's a little too late for that, we already realize you're watching.

Luis froze in terror. Preston's face seemed to ripple with terror and fury. With a speed that impressed Luis, he pivoted around and swung his shovel at a figure leaning against the gravestone behind them. The shovel never hit. Instead, it seemed to careen into some invisible wall protecting the figure and then went spiraling out of Preston's hands. The shovel swung end-over-end and landed with a clunk against a gravestone nearly twenty feet across the cemetery.

"Oh shit!" Luis heard himself yell as the trance broke and he clutched for the piece under his jacket. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!"

The little boy ignored his swears.

"I didn't expect it to be so easy to find you Preston. Not after what I did to your finger last time." Luis looked at Preston's left hand and saw that the boy's middle finger was missing. He found his gun and pointed it at the boy that he now recognized as Martin Hanson. "Funny that I should see you here Preston, I was just visiting your father a little while ago. Such a nice man, isn't he?"

"Martin, don't take another step forward. I'll fire, I mean it."

"Luis Sanchez, the town's esteemed writer. I guess you've finally found a story worth writing about. Well let me give you a head start on an important and breaking news story." He walked forward and Luis fired. The sound was deafening and it seemed to slice at the solemn, quiet veil which shrouded the cemetery. Luis thought for sure this would wake up the rest of the dead. Martin continued to talk.

"Town reporter and ruffian found dead at cemetery."

He had fired at almost point blank range and the force of the blasts whipped the small body around and forced it back against the gravestone. Martin slumped down but he was still babbling away.

"I'm already dead Luis. You can't kill me. The joke's on you," he giggled. Luis saw the three bullet holes in Martin's body, one near his right shoulder and two under his heart. Instead of blood, a noxious, thick smell

Preston grabbed his arm and pulled him down and against one of the tombstones to ensure they would not be

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seemed to have been released, as if the corpse had slowly been rotting inside and his bullets had released the stew.

"This is crazy," Luis said.

"Very crazy, very insane," Martin agreed.

Preston pulled him away and they stumbled to the top of the ridge. From this vantage point, Luis could clearly see Martin staggering to his feet. His parents still stood confused, as if they were waiting for instructions. Preston pulled a gun from out of his pocket and pointed it at the ground in front of Martin's feet.

"Burn in hell Martin!" he said quietly before firing the trigger. Luis understood. The smell was gasoline. Preston must have realized what was going on and he had soaked the cemetery grounds around the grave with enough gasoline to run the town's cars for a month. The bullet struck about a foot away from Martin's feet. Martin looked at them.

"Nice try, but I knew the gasoline was..." His words were cut off as the ground around him erupted in a twisting gyrating pattern of flames. They braved the heat and watched the flames for a minute or two to see if there was any movement. Slowly, the conflagration began to die down and as the fire cleared, Luis could see three forms advancing towards them. The forms were alight like torches, burning bushes that had been uprooted and were relentlessly pursuing them. The sight broke Luis's last vestiges of control and he began to run. He wanted out of this, out of the damn cemetery and the horror which he was seeing. This was more than the occult, what he had witnessed were the laws of physics and life completely turned around and warped.

He didn't know what happened to Preston. For a minute the boy was running beside him and then he was gone. Perhaps they had gotten him but Luis wasn't thinking; he was concerned with his own self-preservation. The cemetery looked endless and he began to realize he would never find his way out. He passed gravestones that looked the same and the markers he had first seen on his way in seemed to have disappeared. Indeed, it looked like the cemetery was involved in a conspiracy to see his doom.

And then panting and completely out of breath, he recognized the wall he had climbed over. He ran towards it, tripped on a rock, and plunged over a wall. His body hit the ground and rolled in front of his car's right tire.

"Oh thank God, thank sweet Jesus," he said to the night air as he looked up at the inscription on his tire. He made the sign of the cross and then scrambled to his feet.

Luis had trouble driving. He tried to focus on the yellow lines in the middle of the road but his hands were shaking so hard that he had to pull over for a minute and let the tremor pass before he could continue. He had regained his control, nearly. He drove slowly and cautiously, but it was a battle to shut out the voices in his head that told him to gun the accelerator and get as far away as he could. His foot felt heavy, and he just wanted it to drop right on that pedal. More gas, more speed, more distance away from this nightmare hell, he told himself.

But his sanity prevailed and Luis eventually came upon Wellow Falls center. For an instant he considered steering his car into the police station. He could regurgitate the whole event for the badges in blue and let them investigate. Yet, his past experiences told him how useless that would be. He already had a reputation for being a gossip journalist, and the far fetched story would only bring snickers from the fat small country cops who were more content to chomp on donuts than investigate any kind of disturbance. The Hanson deaths may have slightly altered their priorities, and if he was lucky they might investigate the cemetery. If they did, they would find the aftermath of the blaze and the two new missing bodies. That wouldn't prove his story, but only draw further suspicion and make him a prime witness and possibly suspect.

Preston grabbed his arm and pulled him down and against one of the tombstones to ensure they would not be

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No, it was far better and easier to just stay away from the police. But what could he do, and perhaps more importantly, what had he just seen in the cemetery? The image of the flaming torch figures moving inexorably towards them was blazed into his mind. He tried to blink it away but it was useless. What he had seen was the occult, perhaps the greatest example of it. There was something going on in this town and somehow, somehow, he was going to have to get the word out.

As he turned his car into the newspaper offices, his mind was already beginning to formulate the questions he would need answered.

The wind rustled and he thought that he could hear movement in the shrubbery.

"Don't be silly," he whispered to himself. He put his key into the lock and turned back to face the woods.

Damn, he was sure he had heard something. He turned the key and giggled a bit madly. It was amazing how this stuff could get to you. He needed to stay calm and cool if he was going to unravel this mystery.

But did he want to unravel it? What he had seen had been simply terrifying.

Luis started walking down the hallway and the questions mounted. How had the Hanson's become involved in this entire nightmare, and why was Preston at the cemetery? And perhaps the central question, how had dead corpses come back to life? Vampires, zombies, black magic, this was the stuff that Luis had always investigated but never really believed to be true. At times he had almost been fooled himself, but in his gut there was always the realization that it wasn't real. Perhaps the participants fully believed in it, or had convinced themselves to believe in it, but it wasn't true magic.

This time Luis was certain that what he had just seen was the first legitimate example of the occult. Of something that wasn't just wishful thinking, or the product of an overzealous mind. It was real, and it had been terrible. Deep inside, where he judged and evaluated things, Luis also had a terrifying feeling that what he had seen was just the beginning.

Luis sat down at his desk and began to make a list of the items he would need to investigate. As he began to create the list, a shudder passed through his body, and he wasn't sure if it was excitement, or sheer horror at what he had witnessed. Or perhaps a little of both.

Preston grabbed his arm and pulled him down and against one of the tombstones to ensure they would not be

Chapter 10

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Preston learns more about the mystery girl Ryan. Love blooms amidst the horror and a strange vision pulls him away.

In between gasps for breathe, Preston managed to focus on the house at the bottom of the driveway. He looked and tried to figure out what had brought him here. He walked over to the mailbox and opened it. It was empty, the flower was gone.

He rested his hands on his knees and crouched down to rest. The cemetery had been horrible. After the fire, he had run and the sound of the taunts and catcalls behind him made him shiver. That he was being pursued was humiliating, the fact that it was the second time in a week that the nerd had chased him only made it worse. Yet, whatever was going on, he finally realized that Martin was no longer the same boy he had pushed around and smeared carbon paper over. Martin was no longer human.

When Preston's side felt like it was going to split, he had collapsed onto the ground, expecting Martin to pounce on him. The grinning caricature of the once nerdy schoolboy was nowhere to be seen, leaving Preston to wonder through heavens of air, what had spared his life this time.

He looked at the house again and realized he wanted to go in.

Preston walked down the driveway and reached the door. He hesitated, wondering if this was what he really wanted. Ryan was as strange and mysterious as Martin and far from clarifying the situation, he realized she would only confuse it more. But as much as he tried to put her out of his mind, he kept turning over her words, her smile, and her mysteries. He hadn't consciously returned to his house, his feet just seemed to lead him here. He thought for a few minutes longer and pushed the button. He heard the bell reverberate and waited for the door to open.

She didn't open it. Instead he heard a voice.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Preston." He waited and finally he heard the bolt slide back and the handle turn. The door opened a crack and he could see her peering cautiously out.

"Preston the mystery man."

"Yes," he said embarrassed. She said nothing more and opened the door.

He walked into the brightly lit foyer and noticed her immediately. Even though her hair was matted down and she was wearing a tattered bathrobe, Preston thought she looked beautiful. He wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe she looked relieved to see him. It was the way her mouth seemed to lift slightly and the touch she gave him as he crossed the foyer and entered the house. Maybe she was even concerned although he couldn't be sure; it had been so long since anyone had ever shown it.

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"I was worried about you. I didn't expect to ever see you again." Suddenly, after years of being beaten and abused, of being hated and despised, he wanted to tell her how good it felt to have someone express genuine concern over him. Instead, he simply said.

"I didn't either." She saw his charred features and sniffed the gasoline which wafted from his clothes.

"Accident at the gas station?" she said flatly and it struck Preston as very funny. He smiled and then he laughed as she stood watching him in confusion. "Well, can I offer you something to drink." He nodded as the laughing died down and they sat in the kitchen. She poured him a glass of water and then they sat in silence.

Tell her. Don't tell her a thing. This girl will understand. You don't know who she is. She saved your life. She's just a pretty little thing. She cares for you. Your not falling for her are you? Back and forth and finally Preston realized that the bold words were the correct ones and that risks were a part of life. Telling her and trusting Ryan was one of the risks he needed to take.

"I was at the cemetery."

"Why were you at the cemetery?" He took a sip of water and then started.

"It seemed to start when I beat up Martin. I suppose it wasn't the best thing to do but he was there, and I couldn't help myself. It just happened."

"You don't seem to have the best reputation in this town." Preston felt a spark of anger.

"What kind of reputation do I have?"

"Forget it, continue what you were saying."

"No, I want to know. What kind of reputation do I have?" he yelled. He looked at her beautiful green eyes and her dark hair. He saw the frown of her mouth and the curve of her long eyelashes. He saw himself tormenting younger kids, hurting and humiliating others. Martin's carbon smeared face appeared and Preston almost thought he could hear the crack of his father's belt. He spoke quietly.

"You've heard I'm a bully. You've heard that I'm a terrible bully that has tormented this town for years." His voice began to tremble. "What else have you heard? Did anyone tell you about how my mother killed herself? Or about how my father likes to beat the living crap out of me and even though everyone in the town knows, they don't lift a finger? Have you ever heard any of that Ryan? I'm just a little curious about that."

"Preston..."

"No, don't say a word. It's true of course, I am a bully. But you know what the ironic thing is? What's really funny is that I'm getting my due, because there's something out there that's a bigger bully than me, and whatever it is, it's determined to stamp out my miserable little existence. It's already decided to lop off my finger, and not even flame broiling the little monster will slow it down." He felt the fear rising and tried to fight it down. He pulled at his hair and took a deep breathe. She grabbed his arm and he felt both glad and angered by her touch. He needed her understanding but hated her pity and compassion. He decided to let her arm stay for the moment.

"Who is trying to kill you?" And with that he launched into his story. He talked about sleeping in the woods and she wanted to know why he slept in the woods. So he told her about his father. She probed and dwelled and Preston let her because he wanted to tell the story finally and she seemed ready to listen. He described the

Preston learns more about the mystery girl Ryan. Loveblossoms amidst the horror and a strange visit pulls h

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sound and seeing Martin. He wrinkled his nose when he described the smell and tried to remember Martin's exact words. When that portion was over he told her about the cemetery.

"It's crazy, just crazy and I wouldn't blame you if you thought I was a nut. I don't really know what's happening."

"I still don't understand why you went to the cemetery?"

"That was stupidity on my part. I had a feeling something was going to happen with his parents and I knew Martin would show up. I soaked the ground with gasoline and hoped to burn him. He did this to my finger," Preston choked, looking at the stump. Ryan gazed at him intently.

"And what happened?" she finally asked.

"Oh I don't know. I didn't see what happened but I think he knew about the gasoline and purposely let me light it to prove that it couldn't bother him. To show how much stronger he is. The little fucker is toying with me. Goddammit!" Preston yelled angrily. Ryan rubbed his arm and Preston relaxed.

"Who are you?" He asked suddenly, breaking the silence. His words seemed to float from his mouth and he could almost see them popping in sound in front of her face.

"I told you before, I don't really know. I'm a snippet of memories and a lot of dark, blank patches." In that moment there was a connection. Loneliness and confusion melding with loneliness and confusion and Preston did not need to ask if she believed his story. It was only as incredible as her own tale and he realized it didn't matter.

Her grasp grew harder on his arm and he moved his head closer to hers.

"Preston..." she whispered, but before he could answer their lips touched. He felt the moistness of her lips and touched her beautiful face. His fingers traced the lines of her jaw and followed the curve down to her collar bone. She tried to say something but he wouldn't let her and eventually she gave up and just kissed back.

Preston slid his chair closer and kissed her on the forehead. She caressed his back and brought her hands down to his chest. They hugged and Preston felt a tenderness that had been missing since the day his mother had died. He felt alive and whole and for a little while, the anger faded away and left him with something that he could only call bliss.

Ryan took his hand and stood up. She led him out of the kitchen, through the hall, and to the stairs. As they walked, Preston felt his finger begin to itch. He ignored it through the veil of desire and happiness which had descended over him. She guided him up the stairs and he watched her graceful movements, the perfect shape of her body, the graceful bend of her joints, and his desire hardened and flared.

Before they had reached the top of the stairs, he pushed her against the wall and passionately kissed her. His hands had become more adventurous, and he followed the curve of her body down to her breasts, and lightly touched them. She sighed, but did not resist. She pulled away and continued to guide him up. They reached the top and she walked towards a room.

The itch had become impossible to ignore, and Preston scratched his finger, hoping the annoyance would disappear. They reached the door and Preston felt a slight draft, thought he saw a small shadow. They kissed and Preston felt the breeze again.

Preston learns more about the mystery girl Ryan. Loveblooms amidst the horror and a strange visit pulls h

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"The last few days have really been strange," he said suddenly, trying to talk away the draft. Her passion had grown and she kissed him again.

"Yes." Her touch and feel had reduced the last days events to a dream, and he followed her into the room.

Her bed was a large canopy with white sheets and a down comforter. It looked comfortable and she led him over to it. They stopped at the edge of the bed and Preston began to unbutton her shirt. He kissed her neck and slowly moved down as he undid the other five buttons. Her shirt fell off and he massaged her breasts and felt her hands undoing the last of his shirt buttons. His shirt followed hers to the ground and they pivoted onto the bed.

His finger had begun to throb, but the adrenaline coursing through his body was sufficient to mask the pain. He felt wonderfully alive.

This was real. The feelings were there and with every touch and caress, every sigh and groan, Preston felt that his mind was being stimulated and changed. His pores seemed to have opened and were breathing in her scent and his nerves were heightened and amplified.

If only his fucking finger didn't hurt so much! He shook his hand to relieve the pain and then continued to explore her body. Her hand moved down his chest and stopped below his naval.

Go down further! he wanted to scream, Go down further! His primal instinct had taken over and the world began to fade. He only saw Ryan, and felt a tremendous build-up underway in his body. He felt her nipples poking through the light shirt she wore and he massaged them with his finger. Slowly, he lifted her shirt and lifted off her bra. He moved around and around and then finally he sucked her nipples and she shuddered.

His senses were overwhelmed and he imagined that the room was bathed in red light. The color seemed to soak the room and he thought it was coming from her closet. The cracks around the door glowed and for the briefest instant he wondered what kind of crazy hallucination he was experiencing. The shift in his vision added to his desire and he moved his hand under her pants and felt the smooth skin of her inner-thigh.

She bucked and Preston dimly noticed that her skin had taken on the same red shine. Beams of light crisscrossed the room and suddenly the throb in his finger exploded. Her hands unbuckled his belt and he felt his jeans being unzipped.

The light flashed wildly above them and Preston felt himself falling away from reality.

"Ryan," he exhaled, before the light, and the pain, and the pleasure consumed him.

He was standing in grass and when he looked up from the ground he could see it was part of an immense field. The grass was up to his knees and it swished slowly in the wind. Every so often there would be a quick movement, like something was moving in the concealed folds. In the distance, he thought he could see a structure. It was hard to define its shape and Preston eventually gave up.

He began to walk, and the walk eventually turned into a run. Something was tugging at him, urging him forward and toward the structure. The grass moved behind him and soon he was out of it, and onto a flat field. The field was covered with scraps of metal and other object which reflected the sun into his eyes. He wanted to stop and examine them, but the feeling drew him on.

He was getting closer, but still he could not make out the shape of the structure. Standing on top of the edifice, was a figure wearing brightly colored clothing. The clothing flapped in the wind and Preston felt the

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character staring at him and willing him forward.

The amount of debris littering the field had increased, but Preston was still running too fast to discern what the shapes and shines were. He dodged a few large structures and leapt over a small river. He didn't hear anything but the silent and relentless summons forward.

Finally, when he thought the structure and the figure were about to come clear, he felt a tug that made him lurch and stumble. He nearly regained his balance and the tug came again, pulling at him as if he was a marionette. He stumbled again and this time lost his balance. The ground had changed and where there had been a flat plain, there was now a black gaping hole. Preston felt his stomach drop and threw his hands up in a frantic attempt to keep himself from being swallowed.

Chapter 11

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Preston wakes from his dream and after talking with Ryan becomes determined to open the mysterious closet door.

He bolted up in bed and took a deep breathe. Preston looked around, disoriented and unsure of where he was. Slowly, some of the events of the previous night came back to him. He remembered kissing Ryan and being taken upstairs. He remembered their roving hands and the caresses which had made the world shake and had turned his perception of the room red. He looked at the closet and noticed that it was closed and that it was not glowing.

He felt a tug at his finger and slowly withdrew it from under the sheets. It was red and he rubbed it against the sheets, hoping there was blood on the stump. There was none. He stared at the strange glow and moved it in front of his face, like a doctor checking a patient's eyes with a small pocket flashlight.

Had it been a dream, he wondered. Ryan was asleep beside him and he brushed a lock of hair off her face. At least she was okay, he thought.

Quietly, he pushed the covers aside and walked over to the closet door. He looked at it and bent down in an attempt to see under it. *This is ridiculous, he thought, it's just a closet door.* Yet, he hesitated before reaching out and grabbing the handle.

He expected to feel a throb or tug, or burn in his finger. Instead there was nothing. The knob turned easily and he applied pressure to pull the door towards him. It did not move. He applied more pressure, assuming it was stuck, but it still did not move. Finally, he gave a quick yank and stumbled back as his fingers slipped from the immovable knob, nearly throwing him onto the floor.

It was then that he noticed the footprints. He thought they might be an illusion and he rubbed his eyes to try to make the image disappear. It didn't. Starting at the door and continuing up to the bed and over to the closet were a set of muddy footprints. He walked out to the hallway and found more footprints leading up from the stairs. He followed them down the stairs and to the front door. He opened the door and a gentle breeze rustled his hair. He saw one footprint on the walking path that seemed to lead from the grass that surrounded the house.

Preston shook his head and retraced them up the stairs and into the bedroom. He stood over Ryan and wondered if he dared.

Had she gone somewhere? And even if she had, why would there be mud tracked across the floor? Preston slowly pulled back the covers and followed her smooth legs down to her feet. He didn't need to kneel down to see that the soles were covered with mud.

"Preston, what are you looking at?" He whirled around and could see the concern in her eyes. He didn't know what to say.

"There are muddy footprints in the house and you're feet are dirty." She looked confused.

"What?"

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"Look at your feet Ryan, they are filthy. Where did you go last night?" She looked at her feet and became even more perplexed.

"I don't know," she stammered, "I don't remember going anywhere." She looked shaken and he couldn't tell if she was lying or not.

"Ryan, you must remember something, anything?" She nodded her head vigorously and he sensed a big sob about to erupt. To preempt it, he sat at the edge of the bed and pulled her towards him. She sniffled and began to talk.

"It's the dark spells. They're coming for me Preston. I don't know what it is. I really don't know." She sniffled and he caressed her hair, wanting to comfort her.

"Sometimes I will have dreams. Dreams that I'm standing on a cliff by the water, looking over a land I've never seen before. I also dream that a horrible woman is in a room with me. I can't see her, but she is screaming at me to wake up." There were more sobs and Preston was unsure about how to proceed. He wanted to tell her about his own dream but didn't. He didn't want to look weak, and the last thing that Ryan needed was to hear about his problems and weird nocturnal hallucinations.

Instead, he walked over to the closet.

"What's inside?"

"The closet?" Preston nodded and noticed the nervous look on her face.

"I don't know."

"Ryan, it's your closet, how can you not know?" he said gently, not wanting to upset her. Her lips began to quiver more and Preston pressed forward cautiously.

"Have you ever opened it."

"No."

"Have you ever tried to?"

"Preston please," she pleaded, "I don't know what's in there. I've tried to open it but it's stuck. The wood must have expanded with the warm weather." She wasn't telling him everything and he wondered what she was hiding. She brushed her hair back and Preston walked back over to the bed.

"Do you have any tools in the house, we can try to open it?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "Why are you so interested in the closet!" she screamed. The sunlight reached the window and it began to stream into the room, cutting patterns across the bed where Ryan lay. Her hair glowed and Preston had to concentrate to shut out her beauty.

"Ryan, what are you hiding?" he pleaded, wanting her to confide in him. She covered her face with her hands and rocked gently in her bed.

"Preston I'm scared. Please come here and hold me?" He took her in his arms and welcomed the touch of the warm skin. She kissed his neck and began to talk again.

Preston wakes from his dream and after talking with Ryan becomes determined to open the mysterious closet.

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"There is something in the closet. I don't know what it is but there's a strange red glow. It comes from under the door and bathes the entire room. It makes me feel different, strange. It's a power, an energy and it can do wonderful things."

"Like what?" She held his damaged hand.

"You wanted to know how I healed your finger. The door did it. When I found you, I knew you were dying. Something drew me upstairs and I slipped my fingers under the door. The energy came to me and I brought it down and covered your hand with it." He remembered the glowing red aura around his finger.

"How does it make you feel?" Ryan smiled as she thought of the sensation.

"Actually, it's really quite wonderful. I feel completely alive and in touch with nature. My body feels like it has reawakened and is charged with some type of energy." Instead of the doubt or disbelief he would have expected, there was a strange sense of happiness at her words. He was not the only one having an experience outside the realm of normal, and that realization relieved him and bonded him even more closely to Ryan. At the very least, her words were proof that he wasn't the only one going insane in Wellow Falls.

"Why didn't you tell me Ryan?" He looked into her eyes and stroked her hair. It was amazing how she had gentled him. "Why didn't you say anything when I told you about what happened to me? You didn't believe me."

"No Preston, that's not true. I didn't want to believe you. I didn't want to think that what was happening was real. I still don't want to, but..." Her words trailed off.

"But what?"

"It has to be true. The dark spells, whatever is behind the closet. For my whole life I've been trying to be normal and maybe it's just not possible."

"Ryan."

"No Preston, I don't think you can understand." He resented the statement but bit his lip. He understood, he had understood from the moment his mother had left him orphaned to an abusive father. He knew what it was like to feel different and separate from everyone else. He channeled the anger away from Ryan and bounded up from the bed.

"I'm going to open that closet door." Ryan shrugged.

"Look around, there may be some tools in the basement."

"Another lie?" he asked, remembering that she had told him differently just minutes before.

"No, just an attempt to prevent you from embarking on a futile endeavor."

Preston wakes from his dream and after talking with Ryan becomes determined to open the mysterious closet

Chapter 12

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Preston tries to open the closet door and the mystery deepens.

He found a small hammer and a heavy pipe that the Ames's must have left. And brought them upstairs to the bedroom. Ryan had dressed and was sitting on the bed.

"You don't think it will work?"

"No."

"Why not?" he asked as he tugged against the handle, hoping the tools would not be unnecessary.

"Because I can feel it, it's not meant to be opened."

"All doors are supposed to be opened."

"In due time, in due time." He shook his head at her drivel and picked up the pipe. Channeling the anger and frustration Preston brought the pipe smashing down on the handle.

There was a flash, an intense red flash that seemed to irradiate his skin and expose his innards like a concentrated burst from an x-ray machine. He felt a pop in the stump of his severed finger before he was thrown back against the bed.

His finger screamed in agony, an agony which raced down his arm, up his neck, and out his mouth. It danced around the room before boomeranging back and augmenting the pain which was building in his finger.

Through the haze of pain and saw Ryan step forward and move towards the door. Red light flickered around the edges of the opening and through the cracks, like a tongue licking the door, slithering under the crack, maliciously, relentlessly, trying to escape and make it into the room.

Ryan raised her arms to gather the energy around her body. With supreme effort, he ignored the pain and jumped off the bed.

"No Ryan!" he screamed against the growing red light and the howling wind which seemed to have suddenly sprung from the closet. He grabbed her around the waist and she turned her head.

Her corneas rolled back behind the sockets and her body seemed to tense as the bands of the redness caressed her body. He heard her groan and she lifted her arm and effortlessly flung him back with violent force. He hit the wall and thought he felt something crack.

"Nooooo!" he screamed again through the pain. Ryan continued forward and the light shimmied down her body. Patterns danced and winked on her bare arms and legs, raising goose bumps. She slowly lifted off her T-shirt and pulled down her sweats to expose her entire body. It danced, up and down, light and hard, and she closed her eyes and let her head drop back. Preston saw the light, he could sense the possession it was taking of Ryan and he howled at her.

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"Ryan, stop it, let it go!" He wasn't sure if it was concern for what she had done to him or his scream, but Ryan seemed paused. She trembled and her head rolled back.

"Ohhh," she groaned as she slowly lifted up her head. The red energy flew from her body like sap and stuck against the door. It dribbled down the wood and disappeared under the crack, back into the closet.

She collapsed onto the floor, beads of sweat rolling off her forehead and spattering on the wood. Preston painfully rotated his shoulder and tried to stand. The pain forced him back down. The last few days had not been physically beneficial to his body.

"Well, at least I'm still alive." Ryan did not say anything. Her body seemed to convulse and then she tried to stand. Her legs caved in and Preston hobbled over to her and helped her over the bed.

"That's the worst it's been."

"It's happened before." She nodded her head and began to sob again.

"Preston, something is happening to me." He tried to comfort her as best as he could but couldn't help but feel awkward. Anger and violence were natural, a mechanism to vent his rage that usually left exhausted yet fulfilled and relieved. Comforting was different and he felt clumsy. He didn't know what to say, and when he did talk, it sounded foolish and contrived even if he was sincere.

"I don't think it's you Ryan, it's the whole town. I think we need to get out of here." Whatever was happening to them was related to some phenomena in Wellow Falls.

"I don't know if I can."

"Why?"

"I've never consciously left a place before. It's always been during one of the dark spells. I don't ever remember leaving."

"Ryan, look at me, come on look at me." Their eyes locked and Preston willed his thoughts into her mind. She was beautiful. Beautiful and fragile at the same time. And also mysterious. There was side to her he still didn't know, and Preston sensed it was locked inside of that closet. "I don't care if you want to stay with me after we leave, but just come with me. Let whatever is happening here blow over and then we'll come back. Even just for a weekend."

"Preston, I hardly even know you."

"It's your decision, but I'm leaving." He thought of Martin in the quarry and at the cemetery, he thought of the door and the strange light, and realized he wanted to leave as soon as possible.

She looked perplexed and frightened and Preston said nothing. He wanted her to make the decision on her own. If he had decided to talk, he would have told her about how in two days she had reoriented his life. The burning anger was still raging within him, but it was confined and controlled. He had finally found someone as lost and alone and he was, and that had made all the difference. Even though the stump where his missing finger throbbed and his shoulder felt dislocated, he felt better than ever. For once, the rage had diminished.

She didn't say anything but put her arms around him and hugged for a moment before pulling away.

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For a moment it looked like she wanted to say something. She stopped, reoriented her thoughts, and said.

"All right, let's get out of here." Preston thought she was going to say "I love you."

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Luis learns that something ghastly is beginning to infiltrate Wellow Falls.

The night was a living hell for Luis. He couldn't sleep, and tossed and turned in his bed with the images of the previous day. Mixed with them were sights and sounds from past cases. They swirled together into a soup that kept his mind revving uncomfortably high.

He saw flashes of severed limbs, and snippets of words spoken from some long forgotten cult member. They came to him as if carried on the wind, and then were whisked away, leaving only an unpleasant after-odor that grew stronger with every transient memory.

Every sound and movement made his body twitch and cringe in terror. The excitement he had originally felt at what had happened at the cemetery had turned into fear. He was positive something was out there following him, and lying in bed only made him feel more vulnerable.

The clock read four-thirty when he finally decided to rise and pace around the house. His pistol was still strapped firmly to his side, and Luis told himself he should have stayed at the office. It was more secure.

He had never been this scared. Then again, he had never experienced anything like what he had seen. He drank a cup of coffee and listened to the wind rustle the leaves on the trees next to his house. He walked over to the window and sat down in a lazy-boy he had purchased years ago at a garage sale. The worn leather attested to the use he had given it over the years. He sat and watched the passing of time outside.

It was a slow, gradual process and the shadows began to emerge as some of the sun's rays begin to poke over the horizon. The darkness of the night was slowly replaced by a reddish light that grew, and as the wavelengths of the light increased, so did the whiteness and brightness. The streetlights began to look like just what they were, pale imitations of the bright star that had fueled everything on earth for billions of years.

The lights silenced the solemn quiet of the night and replaced it with the hum of day. He didn't see more activity, but Luis could sense it. There was a sense of bustle, as if thousands of insects and animals were awakening and moving about under the earth. A few at a time, cars appeared on the streets, and a neighbor emerged to walk down the driveway and return with the paper.

Luis welcomed the day and light, although his exhausted body felt like climbing into bed and attempting another go at sleep. He ignored his body's physical cravings and sipped another cup of coffee.

He showered and dressed, wolfed down a bagel and then drove to the office.

He pulled into the driveway knowing that something had changed. The humming of the day had been different day, somehow less complete. There was also a hardly perceptible change in the appearance of the town. At the intersection of Broad and Happy St., there seemed to be one less car, and the traffic in other areas seemed just a little too light. Several of the stores that were normally open at this time still displayed "Closed" signs. At the local coffee shop, there were only three police cars parked out front instead of the usual four.

These were the subtle differences he had been trained to notice as an investigative journalist, and he pulled into the office more apprehensive and worried than ever.

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Evelyn the receptionist was seated at the front desk when he walked in. He smiled at her and she grunted as usual. At least some things were the same.

"Where is everyone?" she asked in her annoying whine.

"What do you mean?" Luis stopped walking and his interest threw her off guard.

"Oh, I mean a few people are just later than usual. I thought maybe they were taking an early holiday."

"Who isn't here yet?"

"Tom Kettle and Valerie Smizola." Tom had a propensity for being late, but Virginia Smizola was almost always on time. Of course, people had conflicts, and Luis tried to tell himself she was probably doing some research or at the doctors.

"Did either of them fill out the board?"

"No."

"Well, I'm sure they will show up." He said reassuringly, although he felt anything but confident.

The editor was waiting for him when he walked into his office. Talking with James O' Grady was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. O' Grady was a man of medium stature, with a wisp of gray hair on his head that stood straight up on particularly humid days. Today was one of those days. Luis walked in and O' Grady immediately jumped up and began to pace the room.

"Morning."

"Morning." Neither man said anything more and then O' Grady started.

"What have you found out about the Hanson murders?"

"I'm still working on it, although I think there is more to the case than I initially suspected."

"Well, I agree, and I think that may even be an understatement. There is something damn weird going on in this town." Luis raised his eyebrows.

"Weird?" O' Grady blushed. When he had first been assigned to the *Wellow Falls Tribune* by the parent company, O' Grady had fought vociferously against the appointment. He claimed that Wellow Falls was a good wholesome American town, and it didn't need some weird crackpot poking around looking for UFOs in townspeople's ovens. O' Grady had lost, but he hadn't exactly made life easy for Luis. He had assigned him to some of the more boring stories around town, like covering the annual Memorial and Labor Day parties at the lake. O' Grady knew he hated celebrity gossip.

"Yes, weird. I know, I admit that it has to be a cold day in hell before I'd say that word, especially to you, but you've heard it. Last night, the Hanson parent's bodies were stolen from the grave." O' Grady scowled while searching for the appropriate words to express what was on his mind. "Sergeant Bulima claims that the evidence seems to suggest that the coffins were pried open from inside. In addition, a large area of the graveyard has been burned. They think it was arson, gasoline."

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"So someone had a vendetta against the Hanson's and killed them. We thought they were dead, they weren't, they popped out of their caskets and burned the cemetery in retaliation for being buried alive." O' Grady turned red and his cheeks puffed out like a blow fish preparing for battle.

"Very smart Luis, very smart. I deserve to have the situation reversed on me but remember, I'm still your boss. Besides, there is more. This morning, Selectman Rooney's body was found by his wife. She had been away on a trip and Rooney was supposed to pick her up this morning at the airport. When he didn't show up, she took a taxi home and found him lying in his bed." Luis was afraid to ask the next logical question and he could see the advantage had quickly shifted back to O' Grady. The man was very tactfully adept.

"Cause of death?" he whispered. O' Grady knew he had him.

"You little smart-ass, he was stabbed up the chin, just like all three of the Hanson's."

"Is that it?"

"No. The housekeeper of the Jacob's called the police at exactly 7:35 this morning. She goes over to help the kids get ready for school and make breakfast for the family." The smile left O' Grady and he had trouble saying the words. Luis did it for him.

"Dead?" O' Grady nodded. "Same as the others?" O' Grady nodded again. Luis tapped his pencil against the table and looked around the room. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, that's where the problem comes in. We've got two problems?"

"We?" Luis said sarcastically.

"Do you work for this paper. Does it pay your bills?" He nodded. "As long as that is happening, it's we, got it? The first problem is that while we have a story, we don't have much back-up information. We know people were killed, but we don't know why, and we don't even have the foggiest clue of by whom?"

"It looks to me like some kind of cult." Normally, O' Grady would have flipped at the suggestion. Today he didn't.

"It could be, the problem is that these murders have fallen at a very delicate time in the town's cycle, and certain people want to keep it quiet for a little while."

"Keep it quiet, you've got to be kidding!" Luis roared, knowing what was going to come next.

"It's right before Labor Day, before the big lake festival. The town is very worried that any negative publicity will hurt the event."

"You're not going to let them muzzle you, are you? Besides, the townspeople and potential visitors have a right to know that there's something strange going on in Wellow Falls."

"I don't plan to be muzzled Luis. They have simply requested that we delay a release of the information pending further investigation. I've agreed to do that. As far as everyone's safety is concerned, the Selectman have assured me that there will be extra security to ensure that whatever is happening in this town does not affect the weekend. They are working very hard to crack the case."

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"So why are you talking to me?" O' Grady smiled and Luis realized he simply did not like the man. He had his own agenda and Luis could only imagine the favors the town had bestowed upon him to hold the story for awhile.

"Because I know you Luis, and I know you're probably onto the story. I don't want to discourage you, it's right up your seedy alley. I've even given you some extra information. Go out, investigate, solve the riddle. But don't you dare break this story before the end of the weekend. Because if you do, I promise you that I will personally tan your ass with the rusty razor blades my wife uses to shave her legs." O' Grady could make a point when he wanted to and Luis realized the town had paid him off very well to keep the story quiet.

"Got it?" He had been in this situation before. It was best to agree and than follow whatever direction fate moved him in.

"Sure boss, whatever you say."

Luis Meets Martin

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The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

Agreeing with O' Grady didn't make his thought process any easier. If there was a story, he would print the article, although maybe not in the *Wellow Falls Gazette*. There were plenty of other papers that would be willing to buy it, provided it was entertaining and there was evidence. The strange murders could not be disputed, nor could the fact that the bodies disappeared from the grave. His eyewitness account would not hold-up on its own though, and even pictures might not seal the case. Nowadays, the tabloids had become so adept at manipulating images, that the truth was obscured in a never ending series of tainted pictures and tampered-with-truth.

He would simply need to do more research. The most logical place to start was Selectman Rooney's wife. Luis tapped the pencil one last time and grabbed the keys to his car. He strode down the hallway and heard O' Grady yelling at him.

"Remember what I said Luis!" At the front door Evelyn looked up from whatever she was reading.

"Be careful," she whispered as if saying it aloud would jinx her with the danger she was warning him about.

"Yeah, sure," he mumbled as he threw the doors open and walked out into the sunshine.

Selectman Rooney lived in a nice area of Wellow Falls called Shady Run. It was a new development and the houses were large, spacious, and expensive. Luis envied the well manicured lawns and the picture of suburban bliss. He wondered if he would ever retire to such a life. He wondered if he wanted to retire to such a life.

When he was in the city, he could not imagine leaving the hustle and bustle, the activity of constantly breaking stories and the adrenaline which seemed to course through everyone's veins.

Yet, he had to admit, the suburbs were not as horrible as he originally expected. They lacked the throbbing pulse which vibrated through the urban jungle, but they had their own allure, their own charm.

If he ever had a family, perhaps the suburbs wouldn't be so bad. He could imagine his wife walking across the lawn and his children playing ball in the backyard with their neighborhood friends. A family, children, it all seemed so far away. He was thirty-one and after Stacey, he had barely stopped to breathe, let alone start in a relationship all over again. He wasn't getting any younger and Luis knew he wanted to have children. A few years ago, the desire would have been unthinkable, but time changes everything, even the lack of a paternal

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instinct.

"Once I win my Pulitzer," he mumbled to himself as he drove up to the Rooney residence.

There were several cars parked around the house but Luis couldn't detect any activity inside. He began to walk up the driveway and froze. Movement, he could have sworn that he had seen movement by the side of the house. He peered closely and couldn't see anything. He slowly began walking up the driveway again and he felt his heart pounding.

Something felt off. The quiet, the sick silence that he had felt all day seemed nearly oppressive. Of course, he tried to tell himself, someone was just murdered. Of course it's going to be oppressive.

He stuck his finger out to ring the doorbell and hesitated. Did he want to get any deeper into this mystery? Perhaps he should just pack his things and head back to the city. But the thought of having to tell his colleagues that he had been spooked out of a small sleepy town made him stick his finger on the bell. It rang and Luis waited.

He expected to have an angry relative accost him, demanding to know how he could be so insensitive to question the grieving widow so soon after the tragedy. Instead, he heard a dim voice telling him to come in. It was a young voice that sounded vaguely familiar. He crossed the threshold, trying to match the voice with a face. As he stepped into the living room, Luis remembered and realized he had made an enormous mistake.

Martin sat in a rocking chair with a party hat on his head and a large horn in his mouth. He blew it when Luis walked into the room and then spat it out.

"A journalist that never fails to follow the clues, very impressive. Tell me Luis, why are journalists better detectives than the detectives?" He gestured to two policeman who were propped up on the couch. They had been stabbed in the chin and dried blood stained the front of their blue shirts and the pockets of their pants. Martin had crossed their legs and made them look like statues of elegance even as their bodies began to stiffen with rigormortous.

Sitting stiffly in another chair was Rooney's wife. Her gray hair was matted with blood and each eye seemed frozen in a different direction. Her tongue protruded slightly from her otherwise closed mouth, and the blood had dried into stalagmite drips at the bottom of it.

Luis didn't think about running. The horror had glued his shoes to the floor and he stared at each of the bodies, trying to form some kind of rational explanation.

"Why?" he finally asked. Martin continued to rock.

"Why? Of course you would want to know. The journalist, always looking for the scoop, the real story. Do you really want to know Luis? Do you really want to know what killed all of them and what will kill you?" Luis hadn't noticed it before but Martin brought his hands forward and Luis could see he was holding a large silver nail. Just the kind he imagined had been used to kill all of the other victims. "Something is starting here Luis, and you will be a part of it. A new world, a new power for all of us. It was promised to me." He rose from the rocking chair and approached Luis. "You can't imagine what it means. It's all starting here, but it will spread, it's already spreading around the town, the state, and eventually the entire world."

"I came back to this house because it only seemed fitting to finish the dead and reunite the family. I never liked the Rooney's. They laughed at me once because of my foot. Thought I was a dumb cripple that would live the rest of my life hobbling around. Oh well."

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor58the town

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Luis thought back to what he had learned in the self-defense course and wondered if it was at all relevant when confronted by a half-dead, homicidal teen-ager wielding a silver nail. The professor had told them about worth, and about how worth could be used to one's advantage if it was deployed properly. He tried to remember the lecture.

"In a situation where death seems inevitable, a last resort may be to bargain your worth. Convince your attacker that your life may be of some value to him or her. Even if it's a value that only buys you a few minutes or hours, try it. Anything can happen in that time, and it may save your life."

"Once I'm dead, I'll come back to life, like what happened to you and your parents?" Martin stopped his advance and stared at the other dead. He nodded his small head.

"Yes. It's hard to describe, but you will be a different person, stronger and more confident. You will feel solidarity with our purpose." He seemed confused and hesitated for a moment. A small bit of humanity emerged and he lowered the nail. Was there sympathy in his face?

"Luis, do not be scared. It's like nothing you've ever felt before. Look at me, look at the power I command. These people will come back better and stronger than before. They will have the purpose, the desire. Not everyone is worthy of redemption Luis. Some must simply be killed. You should be honored." There was conflict inside of the boy, and Luis realized this could be an additional opportunity.

"Who's the Collaq?" Martin smiled.

"He's my friend. He guides me and tells me what to do."

"Let me be your friend also. Let me help the Collaq guide you." The suggestion sent a tremor of fury through Martin and he lunged forward with the nail. Luis reeled back and heard the metal slice through his shirt. Martin was instantly on top of him and he could smell the stench. He gagged and vomited as Martin dragged him up by the hair.

"I do not want or need any other friends," he said like an impetuous teen-ager.

"I know," Luis wheezed, "but I can help you and the Collaq more alive and dead. You want to expand your power, to spread, and you will need agents to do that. Agents that are not different and that blend in with the general population." Martin let go of his hair and he fell to the ground.

"Whatever you're trying to do, it's going to be discovered eventually."

"Don't you think we realize that?" Luis looked up at the small boy and wondered about what he was about to do. He was trying to strike a Faustian deal, one that might spare his life for the moment, but one that might also kill many others in the process. The ethics of it were lousy, so bad in fact that he almost opted to let the little bugger kill him. Almost, but his own self-preservation was too strong.

"I know a way of expanding whatever you're trying to do beyond Wellow Falls." Martin stood over him and he could see the interest in the boy's face. Martin smiled sardonically and any vestiges of the human boy was gone. This look was wise and intelligent, cold and calculating.

"Go on." Luis didn't want to say it, didn't want to commit the sin he was about to commit. The idea was very simple, one that O' Grady had planted in his head only hours before.

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor⁵the town

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"In two days, Wellow Falls will be full of people from all over the world. With a little planning and my help, you can have them all, and in that way spread your little plague well beyond the borders of this town." Martin smiled and Luis was astonished at the horror he had just unleashed with those simple words.

"What's your plan?" Sure that he had spared his life for the moment, Luis plunged into self damnation and told him. He watched the boy listen in glee and realized that even as he spun this plan, he would have to begin thinking of a way to prevent its execution.

The Collaq

[Top](#)

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

Luis felt the pain throb through the darkness of his unconscious. He tried to keep his eyes closed and force himself from waking, if that was possible. It was the only escape from a reality that had become a nightmare of its own. The throb would not let him.

It was augmented by a sharp kick to his side. He felt himself being dragged and his eyes fluttered open despite his best attempts.

"Get up you sack of shit!" There were pine needles under him and he could hear the hum of construction in the distance. He had a collar around his neck which started to choke him as he was tugged forward again.

"Get up!" came the furious command. Luis tried to stagger to his feet and was pulled down again by the chain. He heard laughter from the dark shadows. He was outside in the forest, and his bloodied mouth was matted with pine needles. The trees and bushes were dimly visible in the moon.

"Please," he groaned to no avail as another savage tug dragged him forward, twisting his leg and scratching his face against a rock. He tried to get up but his legs buckled and a fresh torrent of blood poured out of his nose. There was a last tug which turned into a drag. He tried to reach out and grab anything to stop his motion but he was too weak, and his tormentor too strong. His head bounced off a rock and then he heard the sleeve of one of his shirts rip. He heard water gurgling and then he plunged through it, momentarily choking on the icy water. Eventually he was too tired to resist, and Luis simply gave up, allowing himself to be dragged.

The sound of machinery grew louder and his movement stopped in front of a pit. He realized the end had come. Martin had decided to kill him after all. He waited for the final push into the pit, and the weight of the dirt as they buried him alive. He could dimly see through his swollen eyelids the tractors and mechanized equipment moving below him.

Death did not come. Instead, he was dragged around the edge of the pit and rolled down a moderate incline. He came to a stop on his back and looked up at the stars. Eventually they dissolved into total blackness.

The clinking of chains brought him back to consciousness and he slowly raised his head. A small trickle of blood dribbled down his face and a sharp pain in his neck made him wince. He saw a figure rapping the chain around a pole, binding him like a dog on a leash.

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"Luis, Luis, look here." He turned his head and stared at Martin. He was sitting on a crude rock throne that had been hewn from some of the granite rocks excavated from the hole. Several portable lights illuminated his grinning features. It was a silly sight, the body of a small teen-ager sitting on a disproportioned rock stone. In the background he could see the walls of the pit and an occasional flash of headlights as one of the construction vehicles drove by.

"Luis, welcome. How do you like the throne, not bad?" He jumped up and walked a little distance. "This is the beginning Luis, the beginning of a new order for this planet. Look at me Luis. Just a week ago I was nothing. Now I have a future of unlimited opportunity and power, of scope and ambition."

"What are you?" Luis asked, no longer scared. He felt like death. His head throbbed and he could feel the dried blood clogging his nose and throat. He couldn't feel his legs and thought that he may have ruptured something in his back. No, he didn't want to die, but he was not afraid to ask the question. Martin smiled and walked over to the pole. He unlocked the chain and pulled Luis over to him.

"You know, I'm glad I spared you. You will amuse me. The other resurrected are useless for the task. Imagine, they seem to lose their sense of humor once they're killed." He chuckled at his own joke and pulled Luis to his feet. Martin did not talk like a boy. His humor, his knowledge, his sadistic tendencies were that of a man who had seen much and inflicted pain in the past. Possessed, could the boy be possessed?

"You're not Martin." he blurted out. Martin's face rippled and his voice seemed to lower several octaves into a sound like the gravel being hauled away around them.

"Close Luis, but not exactly true. I am Martin and much, much more. He's here Luis, they're all here inside. And I can hear their suffering and pain and it is the music I hum and the thoughts I think." He laughed and Luis felt himself trembling. His voice returned to normal. "Martin needs me and listens to me, and thus he has fused with me."

"Who is the Collaq?"

"I am the Collaq," he said simply. Luis coughed and the pain racked his body. "That's plenty for you to digest for now!" he yelled dancing around as another truck full of dirt lumbered by.

Pet Teacher

[Top](#)

Martin fueled by the power and madness of the Collaq, pays a visit to the teacher he has lusted after.

A car pulled up after they had finished talking and Martin prodded Luis to his feet. The pain was unbearable, but Martin grabbed his arm and squeezed it with vice-like force. He didn't know if it was a spell, or the pain of his grip that made him forget about his bodily agony and lumber over to the car. Martin opened the door and ushered him into the back seat.

The driver was David Hanson, Martin's father. Luis recognized him from the funeral and pictures which the paper had published the next day. The two of them smelled like they were decomposing and Luis dry-heaved in the car.

"What's the course?" Martin smiled.

"Asurprise." Luis looked at the form of David Hanson and shuddered. The shadows accentuated the ridge of flesh under the man's chin.

"You killed your parents?" Martin erupted.

"Haven't you understood anything? Kill, you can only think of kill. Do they look dead, are they lying six feet under in their graves? Father, are you dead?"

"No Collaq." David Hanson answered. Martin chuckled. Luis listened but the words sounded hollow compared to the stench that surrounded him in the car. Stench was not good, and it was not an alternative existence. It was the hell of someone that has not been allowed to rest in peace.

They drove through the center of town and Luis noticed that it looked even quieter than before. There were very few cars and the lights in all of the stores and shops were extinguished. The streetlight swayed in the breeze and David Hanson ignored the red light and drove forward.

"Who do you serve?" There was no laughter in Martin's voice.

"You shall find out soon enough," he said as the car came to stop in front of an ordinary brown house. "But before that we have a little business to attend to." He exited the car and pulled Luis with him. Luis felt the pain from his past beatings and he kneeled onto the ground. As he did, Martin attached a dog collar to his neck and pulled him forward.

"I don't think I have to warn you about trying to escape." David Hanson remained in the car and they both walked up to the doorway of the house. The name on the mailbox read "Leer." His mind was still trying to put the pieces together when Martin pressed the doorbell. Luis heard it reverberate through the house and after a few minutes there were footsteps at the door. Then a voice.

"Who is it?" There was fear and concern in the voice, one that mirrored the anxiety of a once peaceful town that had been racked by unexplainable violence and death. A few days earlier, the occupant might not have even asked who it was. But times had changed, and Luis prayed that whoever lived there would not open the

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door.

Martin rang the bell again and Preston could see the broad grin on his face. He was enjoying the moment, savoring the fear which he sensed on other side of the door.

"Who's there?" It was not really a question but more of a plead. Martin began to whisper to him.

"I really had this bad crush on Kathy. She was my teacher. Very cute, very nice. I used to spend hours in glass daydreaming about her. Her long legs, her ass, her boobs, you name it. Only daydreams then, but reality know, it's all reality know."

"Go away or I'll call the police." Luis wanted to yell out a warning, to tell the young women not to open the door.

"Getting Kathy is all part of the plan Luis. Just like you. The Collaqa tells me what to do, and it all works out. She's just part of what I've always deserved." Luis could feel his heart beating and perspiration began to form on his brow. He could be a hero, this was his opportunity. What was the value of his own life now? He expected the little monster would kill him soon anyway. At the very least he could save the girl and die a hero. He tried to open his mouth but couldn't. His cowardice was too strong and he heard Martin croon into the door.

"It's me Kathy, your student Martin. Please open the door Kathy..." his words trailed off into another grin. Luis could sense the confusion and prayed that Kathy would remember under stress that Martin had died. "Do not unlock the door," he mentally willed her. "Do not unlock the door."

Kathy did not possess ESP because even as he repeated the words in his mind he could hear the lock turning and a bolt being drawn back.

"Martin?" she said in confusion, her resolve strengthening when she realized one of her students might be in danger. "Martin, how..." Her comprehension came too late. Martin threw his inhuman force against the door, ripping off the second security lock. Wood cracked and the slide snapped and went ricocheting across the room. The door smashed into a retreating Kathy and sent her sprawling across the room.

Luis stood at the threshold and saw Martin surveying the room. He scanned it coldly and precisely before his eyes settled on her.

"Hello Kathy." She sensed her own danger and quickly bound to her feet, lunging for the door to the kitchen. Martin moved in a blur and knocked her down onto the floor. She slid across the polished wood and crashed into a glass table. It wobbled and then tipped, cracking into five or six big pieces. Kathy rose again and grabbed a broken shard of glass.

"Who the hell are you?" she screamed as blood flowed from cuts under her eye and on her arms and stomach. "What do you want from me?" Her eyes locked on Luis and he turned away in shame. He knew Martin's strength and was convinced that even the two of them were no match for him.

"Kathy, it's me Martin. I'm in your class. I just want to be your friend. That's not so bad is it?"

"You're dead," she hissed. He held up his hands and spun around.

"Do I look dead? Luis, do you think that I'm dead?"

Martin fueled by the power and madness of the Collaqa, paysa visit to the teacher he has lusted aft

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"No, no technically I guess not," he said softly. With every word he felt more and more like the traitor that Martin wanted him to be.

"You see Kathy, even the town's esteemed journalist says that I'm alive. Everyone believes him, don't you? Please, I'm only asking you to be my friend." He held out his hand and Kathy lunged at it with the glass. She was very quick and it caught the edge of Martin's arms before he could spin around and smash a fist into her back. The putrid smell erupted again and Luis could see a chunk of flesh hanging from Martin's limb. The blow sent Kathy staggering back across the room and onto the floor in front of Luis's feet. The glass also landed in front of him on the carpet in one piece. Kathy lay sobbing and she looked up at Luis.

"Please help me, please, please." Luis looked at the glass at his feet and watched Martin walk over and grab Kathy by the hair.

"I'm going to make a woman of her Luis, by god she will be a woman." He turned her head and looked into her eyes.

"I'm hurt that you won't be my friend. But you see it doesn't really bother me. I'm used to not having friends. Luckily I have one really important friend, and he says I can have you, and that in time, you will learn to like me." Martin grinned and slowly traced her chin. He brought his hand to her chest and massaged her breast under her shirt. He reached under her shirt and with a violent jerk ripped it off.

Kathy screamed and Martin pushed her onto the ground. A button rolled around and stopped next to Luis's foot.

"Do you want to help her Luis?" Martin asked him. He said nothing as Martin ripped off her bra. She tried to cover her nudity by turning but Martin whipped her around. "Let me see Kathy, let me see." He traced her nipples and then put his hand on her leg.

She bucked but Martin threw her back down. His hand disappeared under her skirt and then reappeared an instant later with her white panties. He threw them at Luis and with a big tear ripped off what remained of Kathy's tattered skirt. Martin looked at her naked body and his mouth dropped open. For an instant, he looked confused, as if he didn't know what to do and was aghast at his actions. Kathy only looked at the ceiling and like a dying fish, tried one or two last gasps at freeing herself from the horror.

"Ms. Leer?" it was a question from the small boy that Martin had once been and as soon as it was uttered, the soul behind it was gone.

Luis tried to turn away but couldn't. The sight of the small boy perched on top of the naked schoolteacher glued his eyes. He tried to ignore the round breasts and the soft mound of pubic hair. He knew he should have felt disgust, but instead he felt only a strange interest and a sense of arousal. The feeling further sickened him and inflamed his growing guilt.

Martin slowly rose and looked at Kathy lying still below him.

"Isn't she beautiful Luis?" He wanted to say no, that what had just happened was horrible.

"Yes, she's beautiful," he said quietly.

"Please, please take what you want and leave. Don't rape me." Martin walked over to her and drew out another dog collar. He pulled her neck up and fastened it.

Martin fueled by the power and madness of the Collaqa, paysa visit to the teacher he has lusted aft05

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"I'm not going to rape you Kathy, at least not yet."

"Are we friends?" She only sobbed and Martin tugged at the chain. She groaned and Martin tugged harder. She slowly rose to her knees and Martin pulled her along. She crawled forward and then out the door.

"You will be my friend."

Captured

Top

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

She lay at the corner of the pit, as far away from him as she could. At first, he had tried to explain his action, or lack of it but she had only huddled tighter into her ball and sobbed louder. He could only imagine the shock that she was going through.

Around their necks they both wore collars that were attached to thick chains. The chains were anchored to a pole at the center of the pit. He had tried to lift the pole and free them, but it was useless. It was stuck firmly in the ground, and the chains were too thick to be broken or bent. He imagined that the humiliation and degradation was worse for her. She was naked and the mud and dirt had already begun to cling and dry to her smooth skin.

Luis had tried to sleep in order to escape from the hell but it was useless. Whenever he closed his eyes, he could see her pleading face looking up from the floor, asking for help. He had been a coward and his conscience was not going to let him forget it. Nor could he ignore the arousal he had felt at the brutality Martin had shown her. He wondered if he was any better than the little monster.

He was also distracted from sleep by whatever was going on around them. The ground shook occasionally from an explosion and loud jack hammering frequently punctuated the night. Always, there was the constant movement of machinery and the marching of many feet. Martin would not tell him what was going on and the leash did not allow Luis to reach the top of the pit in order to look out.

There was an especially loud explosion and Kathy jumped. The blast seemed to have rattled something in her and she cocked her head around and looked at him.

"What was that?" she asked quietly. Luis shrugged.

"I don't know. I can't reach the top of the pit and I haven't been told anything," he said jiggling the chain. He sat with his knees out and avoided looking into her eyes.

"Are we going to die?" It was a logical question and he supposed it showed that her mind was functioning with some semblance of clarity. What did anything matter if death was around the corner?

"No idea," he said, not wanting to tell her that their fate may well have been worse than death. He could hear the flies buzzing around her. "You should probably go to the bathroom in the corner, over there." He wanted

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to change the subject.

"Why did he do this to me?" she sobbed at him.

"He has some kind of crush on you; he had some kind of pubescent dream with you as the star. At least that's what I would guess." She started to sob again and Luis felt terrible.

"I'm sorry, I'm very very sorry Kathy. I really don't know the answer."

"You just watched it happen, how could you?" Luis closed his eyes and said nothing. He searched his mind for something to say, something to console the young woman that lay naked in her own slop. The journalist who had never been for a lack of a word in his career simply said nothing.

For a brief instant when Kathy had lain underneath him, her body heaving with fear, he had been able to break out. It had only been for an instant. He had mastered his fears and almost repulsed the Collaq until he had heard the familiar whisper.

"What are you doing Martin? Do you want to ruin it all? Go ahead, help her up, let them go. I'll let you, I'll leave you alone. But when I leave you will die, you will cease to exist." He heard the words and realized he wanted that death. Or at least most of him did. There was a dark sliver inside of him that he had never really known before. It was where his deepest darkest fantasies had resided, and it was this area that the Collaq had been able master and utilize to pry open his mind and eventually enslave it.

It was the part of his mind that often imagined Ms. Leer naked, or that dreamed of skewering Preston alive in revenge for the cruelty. It was the part of his mind that wanted to vent his frustration on all of mankind for the pity and the looks people gave him when they realized one leg was slightly shorter than the other.

He supposed everyone had just such a crevice, and that almost everyone was able to control and suppress the more deviant sides of that personality. The Collaq had embraced this side, augmented it, and released it, unleashing a torrent of emotion and desire which roared through him after years of being held back and denied.

"Martin, you can let the girl up and suffer her pity, or be strong and make her into the object you have always dreamed of. Go ahead Martin, do what you want." The Collaq seemed to indicate he had a choice but in reality he didn't. His mind was clouded with the emotions and the dark sliver had expanded, driving him back deep into the nightmare of his own mind. The Collaq laughed and taunted him until he blocked everything out and surrendered his body once again to alien presence.

He had ripped the girl's clothes off, felt the flesh of her breast, and he had enjoyed it. A part of him knew there was horror and cruelty in the act, but it was numbed and sedated, like a tooth that is being drilled for a cavity. He had enjoyed seeing Luis stand before him, the horror clearly etched on his face, but unable to move or act to help the girl. The power had been exhilarating and when he had slipped the collar around Kathy's neck, he felt that the entire world was within his grasp. A few days earlier such a feat would have seemed absurd and unbelievable. Now it was only what he was due.

That moment of doubt had only lasted for a moment. Martin stood at the edge of the huge pit opening before him and felt a sense of approval. In the last several days the pace of progress had quickened. Down at the bottom of the pit he could see several bulldozers and tractors moving back and forth, scooping up and unloading earth and rock. Figures moved and he realized with satisfaction that the movement was growing.

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor⁶⁸the town

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With every passing hour more of the revived walked into the camp, awaiting the instructions that would fulfill Monarch's destiny.

The Collaq had not told him much, but he realized that in the next couple of weeks there were several tasks at hand. The first was to spread the movement as fast as possible beyond Wellow Falls. This, he would accomplish with the advice that Luis had given him. With the journalist's assistance he would descend upon the resort and initiate the party goers into a new and quite different type of holiday.

The second task was more confusing but it was the one that he sensed was the most important. There was something immensely powerful buried beneath Wellow Falls and Martin knew that Monarch intended to have it. Whatever it was, the Collaq had alluded that it was the key to ultimate Nirvana. To a power that would allow him to escape from all of the bonds placed upon him by nature and to truly be free.

For now he was content to expand the movement, listen to the Collaq and have his fun with Kathy and the others.

Martin listened intently to see if the Collaq was there, whispering an instruction. He cocked his head and realized it was only his own mind.

There was no turning back, no reverting to the Martin of before, he thought with satisfaction as he walked back from the edge of the pit.

[Top](#)

Wellow Falls becomes a ghost town as the evil advances. Preston and Ryan discover more.

Wellow Falls appeared to have died. Preston wasn't sure when it had happened, but the pulse, albeit the low pulse which once ran through the town felt like it was extinguished. As they walked through the center, there was an odd sound that hung in the air. Upon closer inspection, Preston realized it wasn't a sound at all, but on the contrary, the odd tone was actually the total lack of any type of movement or activity. Wellow Falls was silent. More silent and abandoned than the towns in the old Westerns, because those old ghost towns usually had dust balls blowing or doors rattling. Here, there was nothing. Even nature seemed to have been silenced. The chirping birds were no longer chirping and the breeze which usually rustled the trees around the perimeter of the center was still.

All of the stores on Main St. looked closed. They passed by, peering into the windows looking for any type of activity. Some of the shops had "Closed" signs hanging from the windows, others looked like the owners or shopkeepers had hastily abandoned their posts.

"What's going on?" Preston wondered aloud, as they peeked into Anabelle's Bagels. Bagels were strewn over the floor and the cash register hung open. Preston could see the face of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln looking up towards the ceiling. They walked a few stores down and Ryan pointed across the street towards DeMilo's drugs.

"Preston, the light is on, I think that store is open." Preston nodded and they headed over. Through force of habit, both looked for oncoming cars as they crossed the street. It was not necessary because there were no cars. As they approached the store, Preston motioned for Ryan to be quiet. He could see some kind of movement from inside and they cautiously crept to the edge of the door.

"It looks like Mr. DeMilo but I can't be sure."

"Be careful," she said squeezing his arm. He peeked around the corner of the door. There didn't seem to be anyone in the store. He slowly crept forward and a bell chimed as he walked across the foyer.

Perhaps it was the cocking of the gun barrel, or maybe just some sixth sense, but Preston ducked and pivoted to the left. As he turned, the shelf where he had been just an instant before exploded. He heard Ryan scream and threw himself against the floor.

"Die you fucking bastards! Come on, come on! I'll kill you, I'll kill all of you!" Mr. DeMilo yelled hysterically. He heard the gun being cocked again and tried to shimmy down the aisle. He could sense it searching and then finding its target.

"No Mr. DeMilo its me Ryan, do you remember me, the new girl Ryan!" Another shot exploded and tennis balls and burning magazines swirled into the air and bounced across the store. Preston dashed down the rest of the aisle on his knees and rested near the register. The rain of burnt merchandise continued for another minute before the store became quiet. Preston heard himself breathing and felt the beating of his heart.

Ryan, where was Ryan? He looked around and scrambled down the lane looking for her. He saw her standing in front of DeMilo, her hands in the air as he targeted her forehead. His aim was unsteady and thick beads of perspiration dripped slowly down the druggist's forehead.

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"We're just as scared as you are. Please, put the gun down and talk to us." Preston saw her helplessness and he wanted to vault down the aisle and attack the man. The anger began to grow and he fought it down and slowly, under some semblance of control, walked over to join them.

"You didn't have to shoot at us," Preston said simply. He saw Preston and the gun was instantly pointed at the town bully.

"You!" DeMilo screamed, "I bet you're the one behind all of this."

"Behind what!" Preston screamed back. The accusation triggered another spasm of anger. He imagined himself leaping forward and ripping the gun out of the old grocer's hand. Oh how good it would feel to fire it and fire it, tearing up the store and seeing everything a burning mass of wreckage and ash. He could feel the stress from the past days events bubbling towards the surface, waiting to be unleashed. He felt the blood coursing through his hands and a fog began to cloud his brain, tangling his senses and throwing off his judgment. He fought it for Ryan. She was his talisman and with her in his mind he was able to push back the cloud and feel the blood slowly recede from his fingers and toes. His breathing returned to regularity and the pulsing throb of rage quieted. Control, he told himself, remain in control. De Milo continued his harangue.

"I knew it was all coming to this. With kids like you running around without any compunction or guilt. Society has lost its moral safety net, and now we're all going to have to pay for it. It's led to a total, a total breakdown of order and society. Young people have been out of control for years and now, look at what has happened. Everyone's left, can't you see the other stores. Everyone's left and I'm getting out before its too late," he said, his harangue turning into almost unintelligible babble at the end.

"What are you talking about?" Preston shouted. De Milo seemed to snap out of his trance and he glared at them.

"Where have you been!" DeMilo screamed. "Haven't you heard about what's been going on? Haven't you noticed that people are getting out of Wellow Falls as fast as they can? People are just disappearing and the phone lines are dead and the police station is empty." Ryan sensed his pain and touched his shoulder.

"What happened?" The words seemed to break the man's spell and he lowered the gun and mopped his forehead. He was panting and Preston could see his arms and shoulders quivering.

"No, no, I'm sorry, I don't want to hurt anyone but... Linda and the kids are gone. I went home last night after work and they were gone. The Vines, our neighbors next door, the same thing. Gone. I thought maybe they had just left for the movies or something but when they didn't come back I went to the police station. That's when I realized there was something strange going on. The police station looked like a fortress. The police were wearing body armor and looked like they were getting ready for an assault." His words trailed off and he looked around him. "There's something going on here, something horrible."

"Please, Mr. DeMilo finish, tell us what happened." Her voice soothed him and his eyes refocused.

"There were maybe twenty of us at the police station, reporting missing family members or friends. The stories were mostly the same and we talked for awhile. The police listened and then we heard that strange noises had been heard down at the quarry. Reports of machinery and explosions. The odd thing is that the quarry hasn't been in use for fifty years, since the end of the war. They were getting ready to find out what was going on. Most of the boys were scared as hell but Hilltop wouldn't call in help from other towns so that damn boys had to suite up and go in by themselves. They new there was something strange going on but Hilltop said it was a town matter and the town would handle it."

Monarch

"Labor day weekend," Preston whispered, realizing why the Chief hadn't wanted to let the outside world know about the problems. Demilo continued.

"They set off in a convoy and then we waited. We had radio contact and then suddenly it was gone. They were gone. The last thing we heard was one of the boys talking about how he had seen a big bulldozer cross the road. Damn strange because the quarry hasn't been open for years. They never came back, just disappeared into whatever the hell is going on!" His voice began to rise again and he lunged forward and grabbed Ryan, pulling her towards his ample belly. He looked into her eyes.

"Get the hell out of here as fast as you can!" He pointed out towards the empty stores. "The rest have left and I'm following them." He put her down and then raised the gun. "I'm getting the hell out of here!" Preston looked at Ryan and motioned to the exit of the store. They both walked away from the babbling man and through the aisles littered with debris.

"He's snapped," Preston said when they were outside.

"Do you believe him?" Preston shrugged.

"After what I've seen over the last week, I would believe anything."

They walked in silence for awhile, observing and trying to grasp the awesome veil of silence which had descended upon Wellow Falls. Finally, Ryan broke the quiet as they were walking down Fay St. They were only about a mile from Preston's house.

"What did you mean when you whispered about Labor Day?"

"I think that's the reason the police didn't ask for outside help."

"Why?"

"Every Labor Day there's a big party at the Lake. It's the town's day to shine. The resort is very well known and it attracts vacationers, important vacationers from all over the world. The resort is actually more like a spa than anything else. The holiday generates a lot of revenue for the town and I'm sure the politicians would do almost anything to ensure that the holiday is not disturbed."

"Labor Day is tomorrow."

"Yes, I guess it is. Hopefully someone got the word out that Wellow Falls is closed for business."

"And if they didn't."

"Who knows, we're going to be far away from here by then."

Preston Goes Home

[Top](#)

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor, the town bully finds himself coming face-to-face with the menace and must summon the courage to rescue the girl he has grown to love and stop the evil that breeds. My goal with this novel is to be more widely read than the typical "published" novel. If you like the book, let me know and please keep reading. Let others know as well.

They turned left onto Preston's street and it looked perfectly normal. It almost looked beautiful in the midday sun. The trees moved a little in the breeze and the flowers planted in front of many of the homes gave the neighborhood a splash of color and warmth. Halfway down the street, he could see the big pine tree that marked his house. It stood where it had always stood and Preston wondered if perhaps his fears had been unjustified.

"It's so quiet."

"What?" he asked, turning his attention back towards her.

"I said it's so quiet." It looked normal but Preston began to realize that his street had changed in subtle ways. The change was hard to peg and unsettling and it reminded Preston of the time he had been sent away to summer camp. When he returned two months later, his room had seemed different, alien to him. He realized that nothing had been touched, but the loss of contact and the changes he had experienced at camp had skewed his perception of his room. Looking down his street and walking through Wellow Falls he felt the same feeling, magnified and strengthened. Something had indeed changed, and his anxiety began to grow.

They turned a bend and Preston saw his house. It looked the same, exactly the same. It was a two family house with a short driveway at the side leading to a one car garage. There were several small coniferous bushes in the front that had not been pruned recently, and they had lost their shape and reverted to a gangly mass of branches and needles. The grass was browned from the summer heat and where the grass had not been hardy enough to resist the lack of rain there were clumps of dandelion stumps and other weeds. The brown paint was peeling off the house in several places and there was a large hole in the front porch where the wood had rotted away. Preston had never realized before just how run-down the house had become. His father didn't care to fix it up, and Preston had hardly cared himself. To him, the house was a reminder of hell, a place where the beatings occurred, and where he eventually returned to restart the whole process of reconciliation, short peace, anger, and then the beating that inevitably followed. His memories of the house were mostly painful and yet there was touch of sentiment attached to them. He wondered about this and thought back to something he had read.

Solzenietism, the Russian writer had suffered years of imprisonment and torture in the Soviet Union because of his critical writing about the communist party. Eventually he was released and left the country. Yet, when the opportunity presented itself, Solzenietism did not hesitate to return to the land in which he had undergone

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such hardship. It was his home, and it had shaped his person. Preston realized he felt the same thing, perhaps on a lower scale, looking at his house.

"This is my home," he said to Ryan as they stopped in front of the driveway. He turned to look at her and a slight wind rustled her hair. She was staring at the house as if hypnotized by its sight. Her gaze made him uncomfortable and he touched Ryan's arm to bring her back to attention.

"Oh!" she exclaimed after his poke.

"Are you alright."

"Yes, I'm sorry, its just that..." her words trailed off as she furrowed her brow in concentration. Preston waited.

"It's just that I feel like I have been here before. I don't know, there's a memory, something. Maybe just a sense of deja-vu." Preston considered her word for a second and then shrugged. Houses like his dotted the New England landscape.

"Ryan, before we go in, there's something I want to promise me that you'll do. It may be important. If you see my father and he looks angry, just leave. Don't ask me any questions, just leave and wait for me around the block." Her inevitable question came.

"Why?"

"I told you about my father. He sometimes gets violent and I never now how he's going to react. If he knew I was going to take the car..."

"Will you be okay?" It was a legitimate question. He hadn't been home since the last severe beating and he didn't know how his father would react. This was the longest he had stayed away. He was scared and Preston prayed that his father had decided not to come home early from the office.

"I'll be fine," he tried to say convincingly. "I just don't want you involved. Hopefully, he won't be home and it will only take a minute for me to get the keys." He took her hands.

"Promise me you'll leave if my father is there and acts angry."

" I promise." He kissed her on the lips and took her hand. Together they walked up the driveway, cut onto the lawn, and up the stairs to the front door.

The quiet town of Wellow Falls is invaded by a force bent on taking over the world. Preston Dregor74the town

Leaving Wellow Falls

[Top](#)

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CHAPTER 20

Underneath the mat was a key. He didn't understand why his father insisted that the key be placed there since it was the first place that most thieves looked. He had broken into many homes over the last several years because the occupants had also insisted in placing keys under their mats.

It fit neatly into the lock and he turned the door.

"Remember the promise."

"Just go in Preston." He turned the key and pushed the door open. The kitchen was quiet and he strained to hear his father's movement in the house. He let out a sigh of relief. The house looked the same. A box of cereal lay out on the kitchen shelf and several unwashed glasses and plates sat in the sink. He could hear the steady tick of the clock.

"I don't think he's home." They walked across the living room and up the stairs. He wondered how many times he had walked up the stairs, scared and terrified about the monster waited at the top, ready to tear him apart. He could feel the familiar fear but this time there was a semblance of comfort. This would be the last time he would walk up the stairs and the last time that he would feel the anger and fear which his father had battered into him. He squeezed Ryan's hand tighter as they reached the top.

"This way." He directed her into his room. It was exactly as he had left it and yet the room had become as distant as the moon. His bed was meticulously made on orders from his father and the walls were spartan and bare. A sole chair decorated the room and several books lay on top of it. As he had grown older, Preston had withdrawn as much as possible from his home life. He had retreated to the forests around town and left as little as possible of himself in the house. There was an intense anger in the sparse accommodations, an anger which had slowly evolved and even lessened somewhat in the last week. The reminder of his past state of mind was a surprise.

He stood staring at the room until Ryan nudged him.

"Preston, hurry up and get the keys." She looked uneasy and Preston cursed himself for being inconsiderate. She was probably terrified after what he had told her. In reality he had purposely delayed getting the keys in

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his father's room. The room conjured up the most powerful memories and he felt terror at the thought of entering it. He squeezed Ryan's hand for reassurance and wondered what he would have done without her.

His father's door was open and they walked in. The room was just as spartan and dark. There was also a strange, unpleasant odor to the room. Preston ignored the smell and felt a rush of relief at his father's absence. He closed his eyes and pushed away the memory of the countless beatings. Ryan's body stiffened and Preston turned to look at her.

"Are you alright?" She looked confused and took a step back.

"I think we should hurry Preston." He looked to the door and the frame was empty. Quickly, he walked over to his father's closet and pulled it open.

"Dammit!" he roared into the closet. Ryan grabbed his arm.

"Preston, we need to get out of here, now." His head began to throb and he noticed that the sour odor was becoming stronger and more pronounced. They key, where was the key, he wondered? He staggered back and rushed over the bureau. "Preston," Ryan screamed, "we need to leave, someone's coming!" He bolted upright and realized she was right. He could hear footsteps on the stairs and the unpleasant odor had become an almost unbearable stench. He realized they were trapped and Preston grabbed a heavy metal piggy bank. The footsteps reached the top of the stairs and Preston stepped in front of Ryan. His hand began to shake violently and he lost his grip on the bank, sending it crashing onto the floor. He had to fight to keep the terror from completely overwhelming him.

There was a pause and then his father entered the room. Like the town and house, there was a difference about him. His body looked stiff and jerky. His father looked like a living corpse, similar to the movements and smell of Martin.

"Looking for these my dear son? Ah, like all good children, I new you'd eventually come back home. It's murder getting kids out of the house these days." He looked at Ryan and seemed to hesitate.

"Bringing others into the house is against the rules Preston. You've broken a lot of rules, many rules. My god what a disgrace you have been. Your mother would just weep to see you now, cavorting with a girl, breaking into your father's room, preparing to steal his car. You were going to take the car, weren't you Preston?" He didn't answer. He watched his father and realized he had finally become the part he had always acted - a monster. The creature took a step forward and Preston noticed that the shoes were still immaculately polished. He backed away and felt a sharp spear of pain in his finger.

"You want the car, don't you?" he repeated while fingering the key chain. "Answer me son!"

"I'm not your son anymore!" he yelled back.

His father took another step forward and brought his hands together. Preston instantly recognized the nail that he held before him.

"Not my son. Preston, you will always be my son. I am more than the man that gave his seed to your existence. I have lived a thousand lives and been to as many lands. But in the end, I walk in this body, I talk with this body, and you are still my son." He flashed the nail through the air. "This Preston is your redemption from the life you have been leading. It's discipline and order. Just a little tug and pinch and you will have learned your lesson. No more disobeying me Preston. You will become a part in something far bigger and better." His father had directed them into a corner and Preston realized there was no escape. He saw his father

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advance but he was too mesmerized by the words to act. His resistance was gone and Preston felt his knees weaken as he braced for the attack.

Instead his father remained silent and threw the car keys at his feet.

"They're yours. Take them, go as far as you can." Preston just stared at floor. "It's not a trap. I want to take you Preston. I really want to take you out of your pathetic existence but I can't."

Still he hesitated in picking up the keys.

"It's true Preston, no beatings. Ask your friend if I'm telling the truth." He slowly turned to look at Ryan and she seemed dazed. Her eyes were removed and she had slumped against the window pane. Their eyes met and she nodded her head, signaling that he should believe what used to be his father.

Slowly, keeping his eyes on the man in front of him, he crouched down and picked up the key. As he slowly rose, the figure moved aside.

"Leave now Preston, but you'll be back. I guarantee you will be back very shortly. Next time I will not be so merciful and you will be punished."

"You're wrong about that, I'm never coming back here," he hissed, before grabbing Ryan's hand and guiding her down the stairs and out of the house.

He expected an attack at any moment but it didn't come. He expected the car to be gone, but it was in the garage full of gas. He expected it not to start, but when he turned the key the engine turned over smoothly and it settled into a comfortable hum. Preston backed the car out of the garage and down the driveway, still not believing or understanding how they had ever made it out of the house.

He drove slowly, taking in the empty town, comparing it to how it had been and how he remembered it. It was as empty driving as it had been on foot. Desolate, forlorn, a ghost town without even the ghosts to haunt it and add some semblance of a past life. They drove back down the block and the trees canopied nicely over the street. Today it did not look nice, it looked confining and Preston felt claustrophobic and trapped. He wanted to get out but he forced himself to go slow and to absorb WellowFalls for the last time.

He wondered where they were. In the houses, behind the trees, in the stores? He could sense the eyes of the town's inhabitants watching the car slowly pass through the town and he wondered what they were thinking. A plague had descended upon WellowFalls that had turned rationality upside down, converting nerds into supermen, abusive fathers into seemingly benevolent monsters. It made no sense but Preston had long ago given up trying to explain and understand what was going on.

"Ryan, why did my father say that you knew he would let us go?" She looked confused and upset.

"I don't know Preston, I really don't understand why he said it." Her eyes grew wide. "He was telling the truth. I know it, I feel it."

"How?" Ryan rubbed her forehead.

"I just know. I can't explain it but the feeling is the same as the dark spells. He wanted to attack us, but he couldn't, something held him back, that's all I can tell you." Suddenly she continued. "God, I hate this! Preston, what the hell is going on with me, with this town!" Her frustration exploded and Ryan banged her fist against the window. She began to sob.

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"Ssssh, it's alright. We're leaving, don't worry." She hugged him and Preston brushed the hair out of her eyes and rubbed a tear from her cheek.

"Will you help me Preston?"

"Help you with what?"

"Escape whatever demons are pursuing me. Help me to escape from the dark spells and the glowing closets, and the blank life I've been living. Please tell me you will because I need to hear it." He could sense her terror and it surprised him. Before, she had been an enigma, but now Ryan was like a lost soul. Her identity seemed to be disappearing before him and it raised even more questions. It also awakened new feelings of affection. Her vulnerability stirred a protective response in him. He did not fight the feeling.

"Once we get out of here everything will be fine." He smiled and tried to convey a strength he didn't have. She only caressed his hand and sadly nodded her head.

"I don't think so Preston, I really don't think so."

At that moment a car emerged from a side road and pulled in front of them. His thought should have been to turn their car around and drive away. Instead, Preston stopped the car and watched a man waddle out, tell something to another occupant, and then begin walking towards him. The man walked over to the car and knocked on the partially closed window. He was wearing Bermuda shorts and a bright yellow shirt.

"Hello, excuse me, hello." Preston was speechless and paralyzed by surprise.

"Excuse me, but I was wondering if you could give me directions to the resort." The resort, the resort, he thought, turning the words over in his brain and trying to grab a hold of his thoughts. "First time here and we seem to have gotten a tad bit lost. I've been driving around for hours but this place is deserted. Must be a big holiday." he stated although it was really a question. The resort, this guy wants to go to the resort, he told himself, realizing there was no immediate threat. He wanted to tell the guy to jump in his car and high tail it out of town. Instead, he gave him the directions.

"Go straight on this road and you'll come to the center of town. Go straight through the center and take a left on Buckbend Road. About five miles down you'll see a small road on the left. Take that and it will bring you right to the resort. It's not well advertised so you can miss it if you're not careful."

"Much obliged," the man smiled and turned away.

"Hey Mr." The tourist turned back and smiled. "I'd turn around and go home if I were you. There's something strange going on in this town." The smile faded.

"What do you mean by strange?"

"You said it yourself, everyone's gone. A few people in town have murdered in the last couple of days." The man chuckled and nodded his head.

"Son, I'm from the city. It's going to take more than a few murders to scare me away. Just the other night a man was killed near my house trying to resist a robbery. That was in the good section of town. We've come half way across the country and I've spent two years saving for this weekend. Thanks for the warning though." Preston's mouth hung open and he watched the bright yellow shirt bounce back to his car. He vaguely heard the man talking to his wife.

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"Scared about a couple of murders. Imagine that, empties out the entire town. This isn't the eighteen hundreds anymore..."

"I tried to warn them," Preston said to Ryan as he finally put the car into park and pulled away from the side of the road.

"Maybe its not just WellowFalls, maybe its everywhere," Ryan sighed as the car sped down the road. They both sat in silence as they passed a sign posted at the side of the road. It read:

"Thanks for coming to WellowFalls. Please come again." Not on your life, not on your life, he repeated to himself as he floored the accelerator and left his house, his memories, and his old life further and further behind.

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