

THE
BOY
FROM
TWO
WORLDS

JASON OFFUTT

—Award-winning Author of *The Girl in the Corn*—

PRAISE
FOR

The Girl in the Corn



“[An] unholy mash-up of creepy, high-body-count paranormal thrills . . . Readers will find themselves well sated before the end.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“*The Girl in the Corn* is a haunting, unsettling, gripping novel. I will have nightmares of circles filled with needle teeth for years to come. In these cornfields are such original, disturbing beasts—I was hypnotized by their presence on the page.”

—Richard Thomas, Bram Stoker and Shirley Jackson nominee

“Norse mythology gives this story . . . a unique touch [with] an exhilarating conclusion.” —*Booklist*

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For AC↗DC.

*You boys have pulled me out of more than one
writing rut over the years.*

And that ain't noise pollution, man. 🙌

2016



ST. JOE ANGEL OF DEATH IDENTIFIED

By CHAD CLAYTON

News-Press Staff Writer

ST. JOSEPH, Mo., Dec. 26—Through DNA tests, authorities have identified the orchestrator of the domestic terrorist attack that killed 462 people in St. Joseph, Missouri, just before Christmas, mostly patients and staff at St. Joseph Children’s Hospital. St. Joseph native Robert Patrick Garrett rigged the chain of explosions, which involved many underground gasoline tanks at downtown convenience stores, that injured more than 1,500 others and resulted in \$3.2 billion in property damage.

Garrett, dubbed the “St. Joe Angel of Death” by bloggers and true-crime podcasters, murdered 16-year-old camper Ronald Henry

Johnson at Smithville Lake in 1990, and spent four years in the Missouri Juvenile Detention Facility in Cameron before being committed to psychiatric care for two more years at Sisters of Mercy Hospital in St. Joseph.

Searching the ruins of the Garrett home in South St. Joseph—that exploded around midnight Dec. 21 with homemade C-4, which killed Buchanan County Sheriff Boyd Donally and Emily Kristiansen—authorities discovered the remains of Garrett’s parents, Todd and Vera Garrett, along with those of Karen Novák and her daughter, Millie. The Nováks went missing in 2005 while selling Girl Scout cookies.

ST. JOE ANGEL OF DEATH IDENTIFIED

Apart from Donally and Kristiansen, Garrett's victims bore blunt trauma to their heads, St. Joseph Police Chief Emery Trumble said.

"The explosion scattered the house across a two-block area," he said. "But the bodies were stored by Garrett in the basement and were protected by concrete and brick. We identified the victims' remains through DNA and dental records. The skulls of the Garretts and Nováks showed signs of being struck repeatedly with a heavy object."

Investigators from the FBI discovered parts for homemade timers along with ingredients for C-4 in the debris. They also determined Garrett repeatedly searched online for news reports of the Rolling Meadows Mall ricin attack, as well as the arson of the Mid-Buchanan High School that occurred during a basketball game, claiming 60 lives, and the destruction of the Missouri River bridge at Atchison, Kansas, with

Thermite that resulted in 27 more. Prior to each attack, Garrett used his St. Joseph Public Library card to access the internet under the name Jack Torrence, the antagonist of the Stephen King book, "The Shining," FBI Special Agent Garnett Renfro told the Associated Press.

"His research foreshadowed each attack," Renfro said.

Garrett died in the explosion that destroyed the children's hospital where he worked as a custodian. Co-worker Connie Dunwoodie said Garrett came to the hospital the night of the bombing, although he wasn't scheduled to work.

"Bobby told our manager, Randolph (Blythe), I'd asked him to work for me," she said. "I never did. I was at work like always. I went outside for a smoke when the bombs went off." Dunwoodie shook her head. "I'm so lucky."

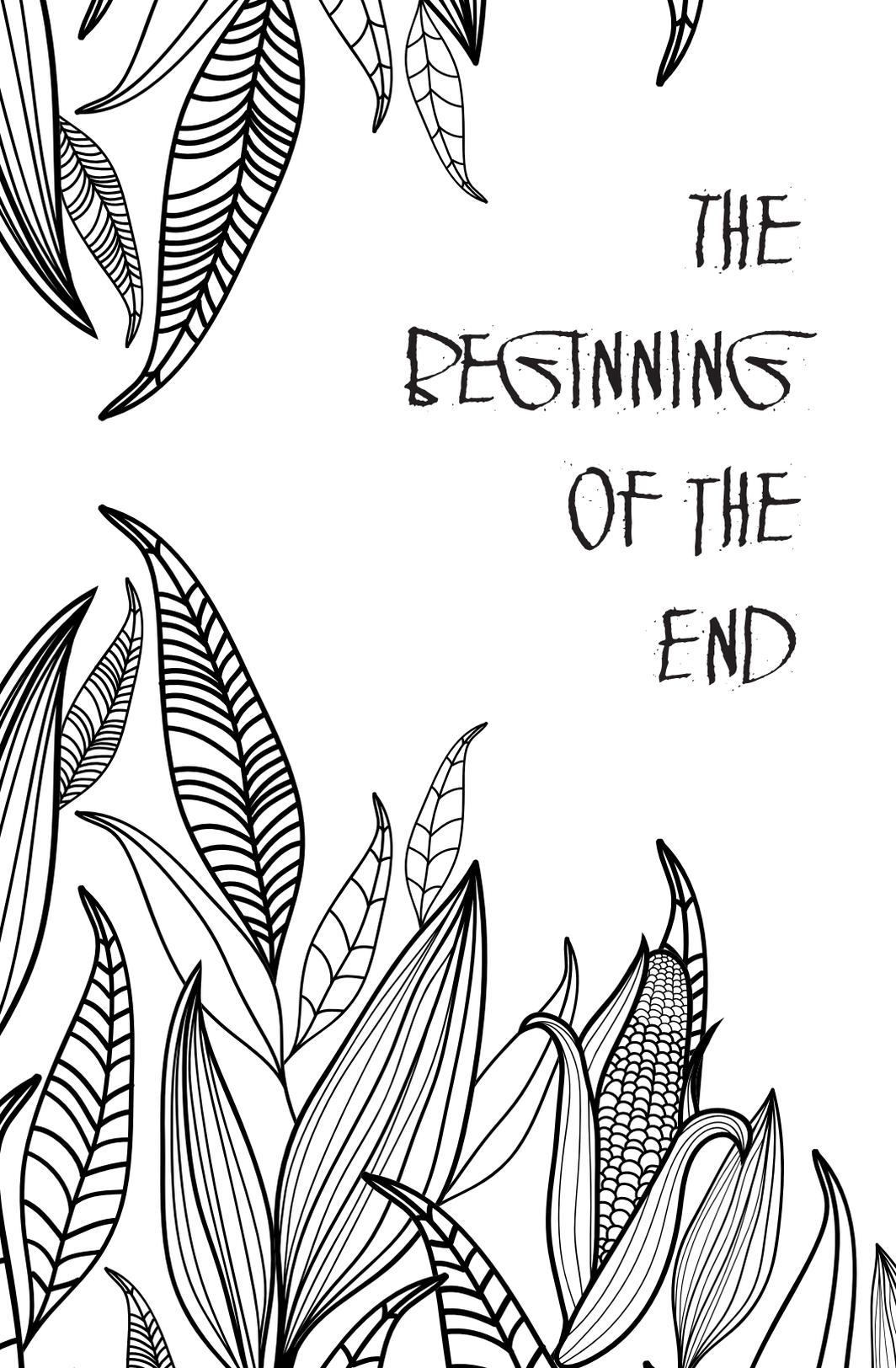
Authorities still investigating "The Day St. Joseph Died" are not sure if Garrett acted alone.

ST. JOE ANGEL OF DEATH IDENTIFIED

Found at the center of the attacks were Marguerite Jenkins of Savannah, Missouri, whom Garrett kidnapped after the ricin attack, and Thomas Cavanaugh and Jillian Robertson, a couple from rural Buchanan County. All were injured during the explosions; Jenkins was pregnant with Garrett's child at the time.

All were questioned by the St. Joseph Police Department and the FBI.

Inquiries for interviews with Jenkins, Cavanaugh and Robertson have been unanswered.

A black and white line art illustration of various leaves and a corn cob. The leaves are scattered across the page, some with detailed vein patterns and others with simpler outlines. A corn cob is visible in the lower right quadrant, partially obscured by leaves. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

THE
BEGINNING
OF THE
END

2017



PROLOGUE

[1]

SNOW PAINTED THE bleak landscape white as Kurt Russell, Keith David, and a band of Antarctic scientists and explorers faced a screaming Norwegian helicopter pilot brandishing a West German Heckler and Koch assault rifle. The pilot squeezed off a few rounds at a fleeing dog (a wolf-Alaskan malamute hybrid, Marguerite once read) before shooting an American scientist in the leg, finishing a screaming tirade in Norwegian with, "*Kom dere vekk, idioter!*"

The pilot jerked backward, falling to the snow, when Antarctic Outpost 31 Commander M. T. Garry shot him in the eye. Not one of the Americans realized the Norwegian was actually yelling, "Get the hell away! It's not a dog, it's some sort of thing! It's imitating a dog, it isn't real! Get away, you idiots!"

Marguerite Jenkins sat on the couch in her mother's house, her sore legs up on a footstool, a bowl of popcorn resting on her swollen belly as she watched *John Carpenter Weekend* on TMC.

"Americans are so stupid," she said through a full mouth, kernel shrapnel scattering down her turquoise maternity blouse.

As if Baby Jenkins heard her, he rolled in her uterus, like a human body was built for this kind of torture.

Dear God, nature was the worst.

“Do you need anything, honey?” her mother asked from the kitchen.

After her father died when she was young, Linda Jenkins turned into the mom Marguerite had grown up envying on black-and-white sitcom reruns. She felt guilty now that she couldn’t move without hurting, but it was nice when—

A dull ache pushed through her lower abdomen; if her pelvis had a mouth it would have screamed.

“Oh,” she said, wrapping her arms around her belly. A warm wetness soaked through her panties and sweatpants onto the couch, then ran down both legs.

“You all right?” Linda said, poking her head around the corner.

Marguerite grabbed another handful of popcorn and stuffed it into her mouth.

“I really wanna finish *The Thing*,” she said, “but I think I need to go to the hospital. Can you TiVo the rest?”

[2]

Fireflies streaked through the darkness on Carlyle Street like tiny comets dancing in the night. The insects Glenn chased on his parents’ farm as a child, and the net of silence cast over the dead street, painted broad strokes of peace over the evil that once lived in the house at 4244.

Not all the evil had gone.

A red face stared at Glenn Kirkhoff—Sheriff Glenn Kirkhoff—in the flashlight beam he shone on the old foundation. A simple face as if it had been painted by the hand of a child—round, with a wide, smiling, triangular mouth—but what sent a chill through Kirkhoff’s already tight shoulders were the teeth. Long, sharp, pointed, like one of those freaky-looking deep-sea fish they show on Animal Planet.

Kirkhoff stood with his thumbs in his big black belt like he’d seen Boyd do countless times. The flames, the smoke, the explosion were

long gone from this address. So was Boyd. What connected Boyd to this hole in the ground that once held up the house where he and his girlfriend died six months ago was that face. That creepy goddamn face once painted in blood on walls in Elvin Miller's house and Carrie McMasters's house, places where a spouse had butchered their significant other with a bladed object: Miller an ax, McMasters a butcher knife.

And the thing was here.

"What were you into, Boyd?" Kirkhoff whispered, the far-off grumble of a car engine the only sound in this old, lonely neighborhood.

He swung by Carlyle Street whenever he came to this part of St. Joe, drawn by that painted face. Somebody, probably the city, cleaned out the wreckage of the old Victorian home, mowed the lawn, and prepared the property for auction.

The sooner this puckered butthole of the world was buried in dirt or garbage, or the foundation destroyed and hauled off, the better. The destruction Robert Garrett had rained over St. Joseph, Missouri, needed to be buried in the past. The city had erased the many downtown scars, only one replaced with a memorial. The plaque read: "St. Joseph Children's Hospital. Two-Hundred Forty-Three Innocent Lives Lost. May We Never Forget."

Innocent. No one was ever innocent. A career in law enforcement had taught him that.

His mobile phone buzzed in the front pants pocket of his uniform. He pulled it out. Linda. Margie's mom. The one good thing to come from the explosions and fires that raged in this city: Marguerite Jenkins got free from that psycho Bobby Garrett.

Kirkhoff swiped his thumb toward the green button and answered: "Hello?"

"Glenn," Linda said, her voice high and tight as a military haircut.

"Linda?" he said, his own voice calm. Hostage negotiation training worked in so many situations. "Try to speak calmly and tell me what's the matter."

Linda's phone crackled as she shifted it. The horn honk came through to Kirkhoff muted. "Pull over, you son of a bitch," she shouted. Linda was inside a car.

"Mom." It was Margie, her voice subdued, away from the phone.

"I'm sorry, Glenn, honey," Linda said. "Some jerk swerved into our lane."

Great. Exactly what I need. "What's wrong? Where are you going?"

"Oh, my," Linda mumbled before answering. "Eastside Hospital. Glenn, it's Marguerite. She's having the baby. You got anyone between Savannah and St. Joe that can give us an escort?"

Kirkhoff's spine shot him up straight. He'd known Margie since high school. She's a great kid. Kid. Hell, she's in her thirties and having a baby. She's no kid. His jaw muscles tightened. She was having Bobby Garrett's baby.

"I'll come myself." Kirkhoff moved away from the empty, blackened foundation, taking one more look at the horror of a child's painting. "It's important for you to take a few deep breaths. It takes a while for a baby to come, especially if it's the first one."

The door to the cruiser opened in silence, and Kirkhoff slid behind the wheel. "I'll meet you on the highway," he said. "What are you driving?"

Linda's exhale, loud as the smoker she was, came through the phone: "A 2015 white Ford Escape." The panic in her voice nearly gone. "You were always such a good boy."

[3]

The phone dropped into the seat between Marguerite and Linda, Marguerite scooping it up before her mother made another whackadoo danger call to Glenn or Thomas or anyone else. Thomas Cavanaugh. A constant thought between each of the growing contractions was she wanted him to be in the Ford Escape with her, driving her to the

hospital instead of her mother. Thomas was strong and gentle and wouldn't scream "Pull over, you son of a bitch" at oncoming traffic. Linda's definition of "our lane" probably differed from other drivers', or law enforcement's. A voice, small but powerful, said, *Slow down*. Marguerite looked around the cab of the car, but she and her mother were the only ones there.

And the voice, it—it—

Was it a voice, she wondered, if it came from inside my head?

"You can slow down, Mom," Marguerite said, the words calm. "My contractions are still pretty far apart. We don't have to hurry."

Actually, the intensity of her contractions had decreased since the first powerful pull when her water broke. If that hadn't happened, she thought she'd probably blame the slight twinges on Braxton-Hicks, or Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

"You don't know that," Linda barked.

Oh, Mom was in a tizzy, all right.

Marguerite pushed herself back in her seat to stretch out her belly. That kid didn't leave much room for anything. "I do, Mom. I went to all those classes. They told me what to expect, and although they didn't specifically tell me to expect my mother to kill me in a car accident on the way to the hospital, I'm sure it was implied."

"But—" Linda started.

Now, the voice said flatly, plainly.

"Now!"

Linda backed her foot off the accelerator and braked until they reached the speed limit of the rural highway just as an old Chevy pickup careened around a sharp curve into their lane. The pickup's horn blared as it cut through the spot of the road where Linda's Escape would have been if she hadn't slowed. Linda screamed as the truck swerved around them, hit the ditch, and popped back onto the blacktop, never slowing.

That was you, wasn't it? Marguerite thought. You told me that, Jakie.

“That goddammed lunatic almost killed us!” Linda shouted, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

“Don’t worry about it, Mom,” Marguerite said, smiling as she rubbed her belly. A wave of calm drifted through the car. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

[4]

Glenn sat in his Crown Vic cruiser on a gravel access road in the median between US 71 North and US 71 South. Some jerk-off in a four-by-four GMC—with stacks behind the cab, going at least 80 mph in a 65 zone—hit his brakes once he saw the sheriff’s car pointed in his direction. Today was that redneck’s lucky day; Glenn had something more important to worry about.

The child’s drawing of the bloody, toothy face slapped onto the basement wall of the missing house stuck with him. It had since December. Merry freaking Christmas; here’s a nightmare—oh, and let’s kill your friend to really drive the message home. The face came to him in his sleep. It came to him when he fried an egg too round. Then there was Dakota.

Dear Lord. Two months ago, Glenn had been sitting at his sister’s table drinking coffee when his niece danced into the kitchen and flopped into the chair next to his.

“Hey, Uncle Sheriff,” she said, the suppressed giggle pulling her face into every adorable shape possible.

Glenn leaned forward and spoke, coffee on his breath. “Hey, Niece Gigglesmonster,” he said.

A laugh, as true as only a four-year-old can make, erupted from her. “Wanna see the picture I drew?”

“Drew,” Kirkhoff’s sister Kathy said from where she was speaking on her mobile phone; their mom was on the other end, and Mom was in a snit.

Dakota pulled a sheet of printer paper from behind her back and slapped it onto the table in front of Glenn. His stomach fell in a steep roller-coaster drop. A red crayon in his niece Dakota's hand had drawn a circle with a huge triangular mouth and rows of sharp needle teeth. A spot of blood hung at the edge of the paper.

"Do you like it?" she asked, looking up at him.

When his eyes met hers, all he saw were black wells.

"No," he mumbled, his feet fighting for purchase on the linoleum as his legs churned to push him back, away from this—

"Glenn!" Kathy snapped.

Glenn's chair tipped and clattered to the floor, spilling him next to the refrigerator, plenty of Dakota's drawings over his head held in place by magnets.

His sister stood, a hand over the phone. "What's wrong with you?"

He shook his head and looked up at Dakota. She sat, silent, tears welling in her eyes; the drawing in her hands was of her family done in brown, yellow, blue, and green crayons. There was no circle, no teeth, no red, no blood. But I saw it. I *saw* it.

Kathy stood over him. "Are you all right?"

No. I am not.

"I don't feel so good, all of a sudden," he said. "I should probably go home."

He pushed himself to his feet, kissed Dakota on top of the head, and left. As he sat in the cruiser now, his mind on Dakota's drawing, he nearly missed the white Escape blast past him on its way to the hospital.

[5]

Lights, red and blue, flashed in the mirrors of the Escape, Marguerite smiling as the sheriff's cruiser moved into the left lane and passed them. She waved at Glenn, who couldn't see her, before he pulled in front of them and escorted them toward St. Joseph. The official

law-enforcement escort made her feel like a dignitary, or a celebrity, or drug lord.

“You’re going to be fine, honey,” Linda said, her voice still tight as a lug nut. “Glenn’ll get us there safely.”

Marguerite smiled because she already knew that. A warmth spread through her like the first time she had a shot of whiskey. No, that wasn’t right. It was the warmth that radiated from her chest to her face, through her arms and loins. The warmth she felt whenever Thomas came to visit. But Thomas always brought Jillian, so Marguerite kept her distance and held her tongue, although sometimes she couldn’t keep her gaze; it landed on Thomas’s and both lingered a bit too long.

A flutter danced inside her; the contractions were coming faster, she guessed.

“Is having a baby supposed to tickle?”

Linda’s head turned, her face momentarily frozen in a grimace. “No,” she said, the word coming out in more seconds than two letters should allow. “It hurts like hell. Do your contractions tickle?”

A long exhale forced its way through pursed lips as Marguerite squirmed in her seat.

“Uh, no way. Oh my. It. Ow. OW. It hurts. A lot.”

“That’s normal,” Linda said, her eyes on Glenn’s bumper. “You felt like I was trying to pass a bowling ball. I never thought I’d be able to walk again.”

A giggle welled up inside Marguerite. She slapped her hands over her mouth, but it came out anyway.

“What’s so funny?” Linda asked.

Nothing. Nothing was funny, but the next contraction tickled her again, and Marguerite laughed out loud, the sound an explosion in the car.

“Honey?”

The sheriff’s cruiser signaled, and then pulled onto the off-ramp, the hospital growing in the distance. The contractions grew stronger

and Marguerite bit her bottom lip, simply hoping her nurse was nice and would keep her mom out of the delivery room.

[6]

Elizabeth Condon stood at the head of the birthing bed, and the patient, a woman in her thirties, lay beneath a white blanket, her legs in the leg holders making a tent. Elizabeth had been a nurse for twenty-five years: four on the floor, ten in the ER, the rest helping babies into the world. She'd seen nothing like Marguerite Jenkins.

Marguerite's cervix had dilated from six to nine centimeters in the twenty minutes since she arrived at the hospital. From Elizabeth's experience, that sort of dilation for a first-time mother would take five to six hours at minimum, and that would be coupled with the moans from contractions and the inevitable "I can't do this" tears. But Marguerite lay in the birthing bed, her eyes bright, her smile big, clean, and white.

Elizabeth had seen a lot of strange things come through hospital doors, but Marguerite Jenkins was the strangest.

"How are you feeling, Ms. Jenkins?" Elizabeth asked, shifting her weight to get a look at the cardiocograph. Another contraction, but the patient didn't even flinch.

"Ope," Marguerite said. "There's another one."

Was that a laugh in her voice?

"How close am I, nurse?" the woman asked. "Can I have my baby now?"

Elizabeth had never felt so unprepared to answer a question in her career. All she wanted was to help deliver this baby, pray to God it was healthy, finish her shift, go home, and have a drink, or two, or three, and forget this night ever happened.

"It's hard to tell," Elizabeth said, poking buttons on her pager. "But I think we're close enough to ring the doctor."

Marguerite clapped. She freaking clapped before she giggled again.

“Whoa. There’s another contraction,” Marguerite said, twisting her shoulders to look at Elizabeth full-on. A smile decorated the woman’s face. Her skin, bronzed by the sun, glowed with health; there wasn’t a bead of sweat on her. “I’ve heard so many horror stories, but my contractions tickle.”

Something’s seriously wrong here.

The door to Marguerite’s private room soundlessly slid open and Dr. Morrigan swept in, a new nurse in his wake. Elizabeth couldn’t remember her name, but she was young, cute, and blond, which meant she was going places.

“Ms. Jenkins,” the doctor said, grinning his thousand-dollar teeth at the expectant mother, his breath smelling of spearmint Mentos, his blood flowing with low-dose amphetamines. “And how are we feeling?”

Elizabeth hated working with Dr. Phil “Golf is My Life” Morrigan, but it was his night.

“Um, Dr. Morrigan,” Elizabeth started, but he waved her off. Prick.

“I feel great,” Marguerite chirped in a cheerleader sort of way. “Can I have this baby now? Jake’s telling me he’s ready.”

Dr. Morrigan settled himself on a stool at the end of the birthing table and looked up the leg tent, right into the Action Zone. He leaned back enough to see Marguerite over her wide-open legs, his forehead creased.

“Dear Lord,” he said, his voice nearly a whisper. “The baby’s crowning.” Dr. Morrigan looked up at Elizabeth. “Nurse. Why didn’t you page me sooner?”

That drink sounded better and better.

Marguerite tried to sit up; Elizabeth slapped hands onto the woman’s shoulders and held her down. She tried to shake off Elizabeth’s hands, but the strength from too many years of dealing with patients, heavy medical equipment, and a drunken ex-husband kept Marguerite pinned to the bed.

“What’s happening?” Marguerite asked as calmly as if she’d asked the time.

Elizabeth didn’t flinch. This woman should be screaming.

The Mentos smile pulled at the doctor’s lips. “Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Everything’s fine here.” He pushed the sheet higher on Marguerite’s thighs and settled in. Seconds later, he held a silent baby, its head full of black hair.

“Well, Ms. Jenkins,” he said calmly, although Elizabeth caught the waver in his voice. “You have a perfectly, um, perfectly healthy baby boy.”

Dr. Morrigan stood and stepped toward the head of the birthing bed. The baby lay in his arms, its eyes wide, chest rising and falling steadily. It didn’t blink, it didn’t cry—the umbilical cord was gone, the belly button a hole in the infant’s pudgy tummy.

Jesus Christ.

“Uh, Doctor,” Elizabeth began, but a hard flash of Dr. Morrigan’s eyes cut her off.

His smile returned and his eyes softened as he lowered Jacob Jenkins onto his mother’s now-bare chest. The baby immediately began to nurse.

Marguerite laughed. “He’s an eager little guy, isn’t he?”

He was. Most babies Elizabeth had seen took coaxing to feed. She stood still in her Oofos clogs, staring into the baby’s eyes. Its black irises stared back into hers. It never blinked.

“Nurse,” Elizabeth thought she heard, her eyes trapped by the baby’s. The silent, sucking baby. Darkness pulled a frigid line across the room. The Mentos doctor, the mother, the young blond nurse were all bathed in shadow. Elizabeth’s breath rose in white dragon huffs.

A hand fell on her shoulder. “Nurse.”

Elizabeth broke eye contact with the quiet infant feeding from his mother’s breast. Dr. Morrigan stood next to her, his face white. A line of sweat ran down his temple. The room suddenly became bright again, the temperature its normal 73 degrees Fahrenheit.

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” Elizabeth said, trying to swallow the vile thoughts inside her. The baby. Something was wrong with the baby.

“Please take”—he paused to look at Marguerite—“Jacob, is it?”

Marguerite’s effortless smile was nothing Elizabeth had ever seen on a mother who had just given birth.

“Yes. I’m going to call him Jake.”

“Then,” Dr. Morrigan said to Elizabeth, “when Jake’s finished feeding, please clean him up, check his vitals, and take him to the nursery.” He motioned to the young blond nurse, who wanted to be anywhere else but here. “Madison will help ease Ms. Jenkins into postpartum recovery.”

“Doc—Doctor?” Madison stuttered.

“Get her ready,” Dr. Morrigan said through clenched teeth, then walked through the door, leaving the nurses alone in a small room with a mother who felt no pain during birth and a baby who didn’t have an umbilical cord.

Elizabeth coughed before speaking. “May I?” she asked, stepping to the side of the birthing bed and holding out hands snapped inside latex gloves.

What the hell is this? shot through her head. The room felt different from any delivery room Elizabeth had ever been in—including her own. It should stink. Body odor, urine, feces, the sweet stench of amniotic fluid, but the room smelled of, smelled of—

What?

A childhood memory from growing up on a farm crept into her thoughts. Corn. The smell of the birthing room was like a cornfield.

Jacob’s head turned from his mother’s breast, the pink nipple popping from his mouth. His eyes found Elizabeth’s; they weren’t blue like most of the newborns she’d welcomed to the outside world. These were black pools of iris in the stark white of clean sclera. Her hand caught the bedrail to keep her from spilling onto the floor. The eyes. Dear God, the eyes. Those eyes knew something.

“I guess I could use a nap,” Marguerite said. “Or maybe dinner and some TV. The thought of raising a kid is exhausting.” She looked at Elizabeth, the woman’s simple grin seemingly alien to her. “You know what I mean?”

The room swam.

“Oooh,” shot from Elizabeth as she dropped to the floor. Her elbow cracked the bed frame as she fell, collapsing in a ball. Pain shot through her arm.

“Hey,” Marguerite said, turning toward the side of the bed and looking over; her swollen breast stuck between the bed and the rail. Milk dripped onto Elizabeth’s forehead.

Elizabeth turned and looked up at the woman who was still her patient. The baby in Marguerite’s arms smiled at her. It smiled. The fucking baby smiled.

“Are you okay?” Marguerite asked.

Elizabeth nodded, her head uncomfortably slow. It hurt.

“Yes,” she said, wiping breast milk from her face. “I just slipped, that’s all.”

She inhaled through the nose and exhaled through the mouth, like she was supposed to teach mothers during childbirth, mothers who weren’t Marguerite Jenkins.

“Madison,” Elizabeth said from the floor. The young nurse unfroze and hurried toward her; there was panic in her face. “Please take Jacob and do his readings, then bathe him and get him a bed in the nursery.”

A flash of shock crossed her face. “But—”

“Do it!” Elizabeth barked.

Madison glared down at her but turned toward the bed and took Jacob from his mother. The young nurse’s arms shook—that didn’t escape Elizabeth. She rolled and pushed herself off the floor, stopping just a moment by Madison, who was weighing tiny Jake, with his adult eyes.

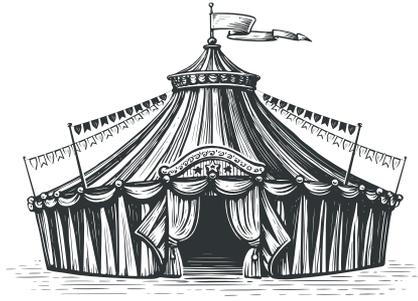
On the drive home, those eyes lingered in her rearview mirror, and she screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

PART 1



The image features a black background with white line-art illustrations of leaves and a corn cob. The leaves are scattered throughout, with some in the upper left and others in the lower half. The corn cob is positioned in the lower right quadrant, partially obscured by leaves. The year '2021' is written in a white, stylized font in the upper right area.

2021



CHAPTER ONE

[1]

“DAMN IT.”

Thomas Cavanaugh yanked his hand from under the hydraulic hose assembly of the old John Deere 4630, blood glistening on his skinned knuckles. His wrist caught a hose; it popped free from the gauge adapter and golden-brown fluid gushed onto his already sweat- and oil-stained T-shirt. His dad, Kyle, grabbed the hose and pushed it onto the nipple, clamping off the spray.

Kyle grinned at Thomas and clapped his shoulder. “All those times you helped me work on the truck, the combine, this tractor, and you never paid attention. Did you?”

“I had more important things on my mind,” Thomas said, wiping the blood onto his shirt.

Kyle’s hand dropped back to his side and he turned toward his rusty, battered toolbox.

That dig was uncalled for. Thomas knew it before it came out of his mouth. He died as a child, spent time in a mental ward, and failed to stop Bobby Garrett, a maniac, a mass murderer, from destroying a hospital. He remembered the fight with Bobby, he remembered the hospital—a children’s hospital the news said was near capacity—leaning

to one side as homemade explosives took out its support pylons and dropped the tall building into the parking lot. Then, it was Jillian hovering over his bed at the hospital, her smile wide but her eyes red, her cheeks wet with tears. He didn't remember much else, but the horror of that moment would stay in his mind forever. I had more important things. He knew his father didn't deserve that.

"Hey." Thomas wrapped his knuckles in his shirt tail, red bleeding through. "I didn't mean it that way."

Kyle shook his head, the toolbox lid clanking as he shut the latch. "That's okay, son," he said. "All that was years ago for me. I'm sure it still feels like yesterday to you."

Thomas looked at Kyle. Yes, years. The gray on Kyle's temples that once amused Thomas had spread throughout his dad's hair. Thomas's girlfriend, Jillian, said she'd taken him somewhere, somewhere apparently magical, and he hadn't aged a bit while everyone around him grew ten years older.

"It's not—" he started, but Kyle raised a greasy, wrinkled hand, quieting his son, his eyes as soft as Thomas had ever seen.

"I'm sorry, boy," Kyle said. "Accept it, and let's move on." He pointed toward the house. "The next thing is to get to the house and clean up those knuckles." He patted Thomas's shoulder. "Come on. I'll get you a beer."

Kyle clamped onto that shoulder, his hands still strong as a young man's. He started walking his son toward the house.

"I'm going to have a Dr Pepper or some iced tea, if you've got either." Thomas unwrapped his bloody knuckles, the skin ripped, blood still oozing. "I'm trying to cut back."

"Good, good. I'm proud of you." He stuck his hands in his pockets as he approached the next subject gently. "How's Jillian?"

As if on cue, the mobile phone in Thomas's pocket played the Doors' "The End."

"Well—" Thomas began, but stopped himself from saying more.

“That’s a pretty brutal ringtone,” Kyle said. “Everything okay at home, son?”

Thomas pulled out the phone. As he knew it would, it read “Jillian.”

“She’s gotten really on edge, like, all the time,” he said, sliding the phone app to “ignore” and dropping it back into his jeans pocket. “She’s wanted to babysit Marguerite’s boy ever since he was born. He’s four now and Marguerite hasn’t called her to do it once.” He raised his hand to his mouth to stifle a cough. Marguerite. The farther Jillian pushed him away, the more Marguerite crept into his thoughts. “I think Jillian wants to have a baby.”

Kyle’s laugh echoed off the house as they walked up the yard.

“It’s not funny. That thought scares me to death.”

Kyle wrapped an arm around Thomas and squeezed. “You think your mom and I were ready for you? Nobody’s ever ready. But maybe you could delay it a while if you told her you had to get married first.”

Thomas let himself be smothered in his father’s embrace. “I’m not ready for that either.”

“You think I was?” Kyle resumed walking toward the house. “Take your boots off before you hit the porch. With that rain last night, if we track mud anywhere, your mother’s going to have a fit.”

Mud. Porch. Thomas had seen mud on that porch before; it went through the kitchen and up the stairs. Tiny footprints that grew and grew, and the voice: “I’m upstairs. Come play with me.”

By the time Thomas reached the porch, nervous sweat beaded his face.

[2]

The cinnamon schnapps burned as it went down; it always did for the first couple of shots. By the end of her shift, Elizabeth knew it would go down like water. She popped similar-smelling cinnamon mints and slid open the lock to the bathroom stall, slipping outside. She’d never

drunk at work before. The concept was wrong, inexcusable, irresponsible, but that baby, that monster of a baby. It didn't give her a choice. The damnable thing with the dark eyes and the belly button—and the smile. Newborns didn't smile—it forced her, shoved her to the edge of sanity until she needed a nip or two, just enough to keep her from falling over the edge of a psychological cliff into an abyss she knew there was no way back from. The schnapps calmed her nerves enough to step into another birthing room. But nobody knew. How could they? The cinnamon mints covered everything.

Dr. Morrigan. Dr. Mentos. That bastard. He refused to talk about the demon baby. Refused to admit there was anything wrong with it, or the mother, or the birth. She didn't like him to begin with, but his willful ignorance made her hate him.

She stepped into the hall, blinking at the bright white that surrounded her. The birthing hall was quiet—only three mothers in labor, and only one who would probably give birth during her shift. Elizabeth approached the door as Dr. Mentos opened it and stepped out. She stopped and let him pass.

“Doctor,” she said, taking care to enunciate both syllables.

“Yes, nurse.” His eyes avoided hers as they had for the past four years, since that Jenkins woman. He coughed into his hand and said, “Mrs. Tolbertson is dilated to seven centimeters. This is her third child, so please keep a close eye on her. Page me when she's ready.”

Then he left. No, he didn't just leave, he scampered down the hall. Elizabeth had a feeling Dr. Mentos's amphetamine habit had grown into something more.

[3]

Kyle Cavanaugh drained his second noon beer and dropped the can in the recycling bin. Thomas sat at the same table where his mother had served meals his whole life.

“You know, Dad,” Thomas said, dishing spoonfuls of mashed cauliflower from a bowl. “You could cook every once in a while. It’s not the 1950s.”

His mom laughed through a mouthful of chicken. She held up a hand in front of her mouth until she swallowed.

“Your father tried to cook, to erase some of the . . . what did you call it, honey? The inequitable burden of spousal stereotypes?”

Dad nodded. “Something like that, yeah.”

“It lasted for a week,” Mom continued. “I’d have had better meals eating out of the hamper.”

A knock came from the screen door and Jillian stepped in wearing Thomas’s Quiet Riot T-shirt, her fiery hair pulled back in a ponytail. A laugh that formed inside Thomas died before it could erupt. He’d known Jillian for a long time, had been in love with her for a long time, but she wasn’t the person he once knew. The feelings between them had changed, on both sides.

“Jillian,” Mom said, waving for her to come in. “Get yourself a plate.”

Jillian crossed the scuffed black-and-white-tiled kitchen floor and sat at the table. “No, thanks. I’m not hungry,” she said before shooting back up and skipping to the fridge. “I will take a beer though.” She turned to Thomas’s dad. “Kyle?”

He nodded, and she grabbed two.

“So,” Dad said, pulling back the tab. It opened with a crack. “Thomas says you want to have a baby.”

Beer spit across the table. “What?”

Dad laughed hard enough he slapped his thigh.

“No.” She glanced at Thomas, her brows pinched. “For the record, I told Thomas I wanted to babysit Jake. There’s a difference.”

“I would like a grandchild,” Mom said as calmly as if she’d said, “I’d like a sandwich.” “Eventually.”

Jillian slid her hand over Thomas’s, her touch cold; a shudder ran through him.

“I’ve talked about Jake so much because I like children, especially babies, and he’s the only kid in our . . . circle? Triangle? Straight line of friends.” She squeezed. “Did you know, when we’re at the store, and there’s a young mom with a baby in front of us in the checkout line, I want to ask her if I can smell its head.”

“That’s weird,” Thomas said.

“No,” Mom said, glancing from Jillian to Thomas, a hazy look in her eyes. “It’s not. You must have never smelled a baby’s head, hon. It’s heaven. I want to smell babies’ heads too.”

“You see.” Jillian’s face suddenly looked different. Harder. More angular. The pink rash she sometimes got spread across her cheek. “Your mom gets it.” She took a drink of beer and glanced at Thomas’s mom. “And what’s better is their toes.”

The grin across Thomas’s mom’s face looked like she was the one drinking. “Yes. Yes.”

“Don’t you just want to eat their toes?”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes. They’re like little bits of popcorn chicken.”

Thomas glanced at his dad. He’d fallen asleep in his chair, a forkful of potatoes suspended above his plate.

Thomas’s stomach grew taut. What’s happening?

“I know, Debbie,” Jillian said, a giggle in her words. “And their fingers. Oh, yes. I love to eat their fingers. They’re like little—”

Debbie’s face dropped slack; seemed to lose its hold on the conversation. Her next words came out in a whisper: “popcorn chicken.”

Thomas pulled his hand out from beneath Jillian’s.

“Jillian?” he asked, his mouth thick, like it was full of peanut butter. The kitchen sank into darkness, and thick fog formed over the table. A wave of exhaustion tilted Thomas’s head backward in his chair.

“And their succulent little thighs—”

Thomas’s head fell forward, and he jerked awake, the fog (fog? In the house?), the exhaustion, the heavy, thick air gone. Jillian sat next to him holding a can of Miller Lite. Mom stared at him with her glassy

four-vodkas-in smile, though she never drank before lunch. Dad shook his head and ate the forkful of potatoes as if he hadn't fallen asleep at the table.

Jillian smiled at Thomas as if everything was fine.

[4]

A yawn pulled at Elizabeth Condon in between Mrs. Lilith Tolbertson's four millionth contraction and her four million and first. Or fifth. Whatever.

Come on, Elizabeth thought. Have this baby already.

Elizabeth had another tug or two by this point. Dr. "Mentos" Morigan didn't seem much better, not that Mrs. Tolbertson or her husband—Elizabeth called him Mr. Lilith—could tell, but Elizabeth could; his hands shook as if he were on a carnival ride. The Liliths had more to worry about than her having a snootful.

"You're at ten centimeters, Mrs. Tolbertson," Dr. Mentos said, parked on the stool between her spread knees, squatting like a baseball catcher. "I want you to concentrate on breathing, and when I tell you to push, you need to push."

Her head crushed back into the pillow; her hair, soaked with sweat, stuck to the white pillowcase, stringy and limp. The cardiocograph jumped and scratched.

"Another contraction, Doctor," Elizabeth said. She was close. Contractions meant the baby was one second closer to appearing from beneath the sheet, bloody and cheesy in the doctor's latex-gloved hands. For the past four years, this moment had made her skin crawl, panic always waiting just beneath her thin film of calm patience. Inside, Elizabeth screamed.

"I can't do this," Mrs. Tolbertson whimpered.

"Oh, yes you can." Dr. Mentos pulled the blanket higher up on her thighs. "The baby's already on its way."

A moan dragged itself from her.

“Just breathe, honey,” Mr. Lilith said. “Just like the birthing coach said. In through the no—”

Her hand shot out and latched on to her husband’s forearm. The man winced. “Shut up, Chad,” she hissed, sucking in three sharp breaths.

“Now, push, Mrs. Tolbertson,” the doctor said, his voice calm, and steadier than his hands. “Push.”

“I can’t.” Her voice nothing more than a whimper.

“Now. You have to push *now*.”

Dear God, Elizabeth prayed. Please make this baby normal.

The prayer caught her off guard. After the Jenkins birth, Elizabeth no longer believed in God. What god would curse the world with the Jenkins monster?

“Yaaaaaaaaaaa!” Lilith Tolbertson screamed, pushing, her body tense. Seconds passed and she relaxed. Dr. Mentos stood, a baby girl in his arms.

“Congratulations,” he said. “She’s beautiful.”

Monster.

Elizabeth hated looking at babies, fearing black eyes and a belly button, an unnatural smile on their toothless faces. But this baby was pink, spotted with vernix caseosa, the umbilical cord intact.

The other nurse in the room—Zoe, or Chloe, or something—was new, blond, and cute, just like Dr. Mentos liked them. She sucked clean the newborn’s mouth and nostrils. It cried out, and Elizabeth let loose the breath she held. Another normal baby.

Mr. Lilith—Chad—cut the umbilical cord; Elizabeth instructed Zoe to wash and prep the little girl, and she left the room.

The doctor joined her in the empty hallway. He stopped next to her.

“Got any more schnapps?” he asked.

The question. Elizabeth had expected it. She was a good nurse, a damn good nurse, for years. No complaints, no arguments, and plenty

of “she was so nice to us.” The drinking tugged at Elizabeth, just at the hem of her nursing scrubs. It didn’t affect her job. No. The schnapps was relaxing, just the thing to keep her from screaming her lungs out if a baby like the Jenkins kid ever squeezed out of another mother’s fetid crotch.

Jesus.

She dropped a hand into the deep pocket of her scrubs and relaxed her shoulders, pressing them into the wall. The half pint of cinnamon liqueur lay neatly at the bottom of the pocket, covered by a handful of Kleenex and a Snickers bar.

Dr. Morrigan leaned into the wall next to her.

“I know we haven’t talked about this, Elizabeth,” he began.

Her head snapped toward him, although he never stopped looking down the long, dim hall. He’d never called her by her first name before.

“But that Jenkins birth a few years ago seriously messed me up.” The doctor looked over at her. “How have you been?”

Elizabeth exhaled slowly. Why now, Dr. Mentos?

“I have been on a razor’s edge of freaking out every time I assist a birth.” She removed her hand from her pocket and sucked sterilized hospital air in through her nose, then let it out. Even when she went home, she could still smell that antiseptic odor. “I’m afraid another one of those things will pop out.”

Dr. Morrigan met her gaze for a few moments before dropping his. “Me too.” He stepped away from the wall and held out a thick white hand. “Hey, schnapps. You got any more?”

She dropped her hand back into the pocket and pulled out the bottle, handing it to the doctor. He unscrewed the cap and drained the rest.

“Thanks,” he said, handing the empty back to her. “I don’t know how much longer I can do this.” Then he walked away, pulling out his pager and thumbing a switch before clicking it back into its cradle.

He turned it off. Jerk.

Elizabeth went back to the nurses station to pick up her bag. It was 3:00 p.m. Her shift was over. Zoe/Chloe/whatever was on her own.

[5]

The rain kicked back up around 4:00 p.m., and Dad sent Thomas home. Mom spent the afternoon in her art studio, which used to be his bedroom, then the guest room the decade his girlfriend had spirited him off to wherever. Jillian hung around the house, reading *People* magazine and napping on the couch. His childhood home was home, but it really wasn't. Not anymore. He and Jillian lived in Uncle Boyd's house, but that wasn't home either. Boyd, the former Buchanan County sheriff, had been dead four years, he and his girlfriend Emily murdered by Bobby Garrett. Thomas moved in sometime after, although he couldn't get it straight in his head when. His memories had gotten foggy.

Thomas pulled his pickup under the tree where Uncle Boyd had always parked his patrol car and got out, the steady mist beaded in his hair; Jillian's old Camry was parked closer to the house. She'd beaten him home—again. She always got home before him, even when he left first.

His live-in girlfriend was lounging on the couch when he walked through the door, their laptop open on her knees, sitting like she'd been there for hours. Thomas used to ask how long she'd been home; he didn't do that anymore. Jillian seemed to live in a different world from his, a place where time moved strangely, a place he didn't like visiting. Thomas went into the open kitchen and grabbed a soda, the can crack loud in the quiet house.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asked, feet apart, butt resting against the cabinet.

Her gaze never left the computer screen. "I got an email from Marguerite," she said, waving a hand toward him. "She sent pictures of Jakie. Come see."

Marguerite.

Pink colored his cheeks. They'd all remained close since Jillian comforted her after the hospital explosion. Marguerite named them the godparents, but with none of the benefits. They never watched the boy. Considering how they'd all met, Thomas couldn't blame her a bit.

He sat next to Jillian but not close enough to touch her, the soda can shoved between his legs. The first photo of the boy staring at the camera would have been haunting in black and white, his dark eyes like chunks of coal. The second, probably taken by Marguerite's mother Linda, showed Marguerite in a T-shirt and shorts, her hair held back in a clip, four-year-old Jacob in her arms. Neither smiled, and dark smudges stained the skin beneath Marguerite's eyes.

"Isn't he just so cute?" Jillian nearly squealed.

He was, Thomas couldn't deny it. But his face, a face mostly his father's, seemed hard, joyless. And Marguerite? She was still lovely, but tired. Too tired. The Marguerite in the photo begged for help.

"Have you talked with her lately?" he asked.

"I just want to snuggle that little man forever," Jillian said, not registering Thomas's words.

He shook his head. "What do you want for dinner?" he asked again.

"I ordered Chinese delivery from that place we like," she said, pushing the thin laptop lid closed and setting it on the coffee table. Jillian turned toward him, her eyes bright, nearly glowing in the golden-hour light pouring in from between the breaking clouds and through the great front window. Her legs dropped into his lap, nearly sending the can of soda to the floor.

"They don't deliver this far out."

She nuzzled her face into Thomas's neck and kissed him; the touch of her lips sent a cold wave of revulsion through him. Her kisses did that more and more.

"They do for me," she whispered, her voice airy, "baby cakes."

“I, uh, was going to bake chicken tonight with”—she kissed him again, pulling his T-shirt tail up and slipping a frigid hand onto the skin of his belly—“lemon, rosemary, and garlic.”

“Sounds delicious, for tomorrow.”

Her hand moved on to his chest; his face tightened.

“I thought”—his words shaky—“I thought you said you didn’t want a baby.”

Her hand came up through the neck hole and turned his face toward her. “I don’t, but I didn’t say we shouldn’t practice.”

“I don’t really feel like—” Thomas said but never finished. A damp cloth of fog wiped across his thoughts and he lay back on the couch as Jillian unbuckled his belt.

[6]

Sheriff Glenn Kirkhoff looked up from a report Deputy Glines submitted that morning. His corner of the world had been quiet for the past few years. A string of rural robberies, mostly lumber and copper wire from new construction, a couple of hunters from the city trespassing on private land. That was about the worst of it, and the rural crimes gave him no problem, but he needed to get Maddy Glines a dictionary. She was a good, smart officer and had the makings of a sheriff on down the line, but her spelling was awful.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

He looked up to find Sergeant Shanks at his open door.

“Come on in, Aaron,” Glenn said. “What can I do for you?”

Aaron, brown felt hat in his hands, stepped in and sat in one of the hard wooden seats across the desk from the sheriff. He’d once suggested padded seats, back when Boyd Donally was sheriff, but Boyd filled Aaron in on a little secret. Most people the sheriff had in his office were

criminals, crying victims, county commissioners, or the press, and he didn't want any one of them to get too comfortable.

"I read Glines's report."

Glenn lifted the papers off his desk and sat them back down. "I'm just now getting to it myself. More lumber missing?"

Aaron shifted in his chair. "No. A dead heifer on Hiram Southwick's farm, the grazing land just south of Cosby."

The small stack of paper rustled as Glenn flipped over the first sheet. "Mutilated?"

Aaron nodded, his thinning hair trapped in place by . . . spray? Gel? Glenn didn't know; Glenn didn't care.

"Yes, sir."

Glenn flipped over another page. "So why'd you come in? Maddy too busy?"

The sergeant shook his head. "She's back up at Hiram's place."

A low whistle escaped Glenn when he pulled out the photos. The heifer lay in mud, the young bovine's throat ripped open, the cut all the way down to its udder; slick, blue-gray intestines spilled onto the muddy ground.

The sheriff looked up. "Dear God. What did this? Not coyotes, that's for sure."

"No, it wasn't coyotes," Aaron said. "We've got a vet out there with Maddy, and the new guy with the conservation department. They're trying to figure out what did this."

"Flamank," Glenn said. "John, I think. That's good, but you must have some guess. What kind of prints were out there?"

The sergeant sucked in a deep breath and held it before he spoke. "Not many, Sheriff. Not counting the hoof marks of the cattle, there was only one set of prints."

The old wooden office chair creaked as Glenn sat back.

"One? One thing did this to a . . . what? Seven hundred, seven hundred fifty-pound animal?" He leaned forward again.

“More like twelve hundred, sir.”

Okay, okay. “Quit dragging this out, Aaron. What kind of tracks were they?”

Aaron stood, and flipped over the next photo in Maddy’s report. Glenn’s hand moved in slow motion before lifting it from the stack.

“Is this a joke?”

“No, sir. These prints were the only ones other than the cattle’s.”

Among the blood, the intestines, and the mud left from the rain mingled with animal waste, were two prints, side by side with what Glenn figured was Maddy’s boot for size comparison.

“These prints are from a little kid,” Glenn said, the words sharp, heavy. “Where’d the kid come from?”

Aaron shook his head, that hair not moving a millimeter. “No-where, Sheriff.” His finger landed on the small footprints in the photo. “Those prints were it. The only ones there.”

Glenn flipped through the rest of the pictures. Nothing. Those footprints from probably a kindergarten-aged kid were it, standing right in front of the rip through the heifer’s midsection.

“Bullshit.”

Aaron silently sat back onto the chair, perching himself on the edge.

“That’s what Maddy, Dr. B, and Agent Flamank are out there to determine,” he said, his voice soft. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sheriff. Hiram thinks—”

Glenn’s hard, cold eyes kept the words in his throat.

“What does Hiram think?” He pointed an index finger at Aaron. A grimace slid over the sergeant. “No.” Glenn dropped the open pages and leaned forward, elbows on the big, old desk. “Do not. I repeat, do NOT say space aliens.”

“But that *is* what he thinks.”

Glenn shot from his chair and took cautious steps to the coffee machine. He’d made the coffee early this morning, so it was going to taste

like it had been drained from an engine block, but he poured himself a cup anyway.

“Little green men. Next thing somebody’s going to tell me it was fairies.”

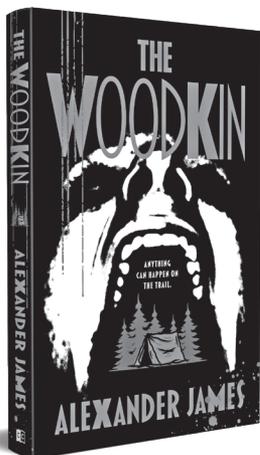
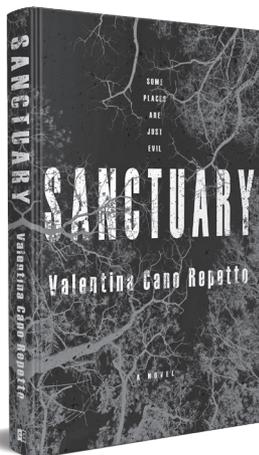
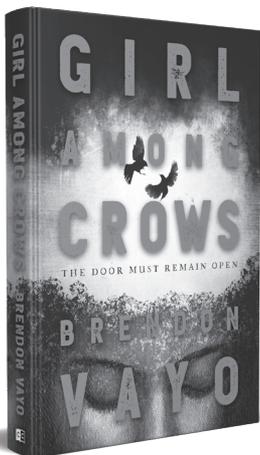
Aaron exhaled, the sound louder than it should have been. “Things have been pretty quiet since, well, since—”

“I know,” Glenn cut him off. “And that’s how I want to keep it. Send Maddy in here when she gets back.”

Something was seriously wrong.

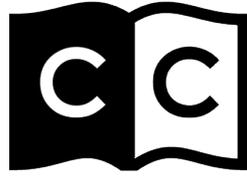


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