

STARKVILLE

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AuthorHouse

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Prologue

Emmet Scarbrough did not believe in monsters.

The entire morning Emmet focused on that one thought as he cleared rocks and debris away from the entrance to Howling Cave.

When he was a boy, Emmet had heard stories about a monster buried deep within the caverns of Howling Cave over one hundred and thirty years ago. A monster the Chinese believed was a demon that had escaped from the spirit world. Whether demon or monster, legend said it was

capable of sucking the soul right out of a man.

This was the monster Emmet tried not to believe in most of all, yet this was the monster that kept haunting Emmet's mind. Although he was not a churchgoing man, Emmet prayed to God the stories were not true.

Emmet now stood just ten feet from the entrance to Howling Cave, his German Shepherd, Scout, at his side. He stared at the black mouth gaping at him in a silent scream. Scout whined softly, stirring Emmet from thoughts of the grotesque, mythical creature. Emmet looked down at his companion. The dog gave him side-long glances full of worry and fear.

"It'll be okay, Scout old boy," Emmet said soothingly.

Scout continued to whine, as if warning his master not to go into the monster's lair.

Emmet ignored the dog. His attention drifted to the canteen, miner's helmet, and the large mattock lying at his feet. He reached into the back pocket of his overalls, pulling a handkerchief out and mopping the sweat from the smooth skin of his bald head.

When Emmet first started working, the mountain air had still been cool from the night before. He had felt comfortable in his flannel shirt, overalls, and heavy work boots even in the boxed canyon where a breeze was hard to come by. Now the hot sun blazed overhead. The surrounding

rock and red dirt absorbed the heat, giving Emmet the crazy urge to strip to the buff and pour the water from the canteen over his head.

Instead, he reached down, picked the canteen up and took a long, hard swallow of warm water.

Scout rubbed his nose against Emmet's leg, all the while continuing his cautionary whine.

Emmet stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket and threw the canteen onto the ground. "It'll be okay, Scout," he said again. As he reached down and scratched the dog behind the ear, Emmet gazed toward the pine trees lining the top of the canyon walls. Their branches fluttered in a cool mountain breeze. Emmet wished he were up there, the subtle scent of pine in his nostrils, rather than down in a hell hole of a canyon, covered with red dirt and sweat.

Think of the gold. He told himself.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MONSTER?

"It'll be okay," he repeated more to himself than to Scout. Even as those words left his lips, Emmet wasn't sure he believed them.

SUCK THE SOUL RIGHT OUT OF A MAN.

Think of the gold.

Emmet bent over, picking the helmet up in one hand and the wooden handle of the mattock in the other. Straightening back up, Emmet placed the helmet on his head

and hefted the heavy mattock onto his shoulder. The weight of the iron head threw Emmet off balance. He shuffled backwards in the red dirt before taking two hesitant steps toward the cave.

SUCK THE SOUL RIGHT OUT OF A MAN.

Emmet stopped. Even though he was ashamed of his childish thoughts of monsters and demons, he was not able to stop those words from reverberating through his mind.

Emmet drew in a large breath of the hot, stifling air. He moved slowly toward the cave, thoughts of the monster infesting his mind. He was unaware of Scout alongside him, keeping a steady pace, determined to follow him into the impending danger.

SUCK THE SOUL RIGHT OUT OF A MAN. Emmet's mind kept screaming at him.

Gold. Emmet tried to push all other thoughts out of his mind. *Think of gold.*

SUCK THE SOUL....

There are no monsters. There's only gold.

...RIGHT OUT OF A MAN.

Gold. Buried since 1857.

ALONG WITH THE MONSTER.

Emmet stopped just outside the mouth of Howling Cave, thoughts of gold and monsters still battling for control of his mind. The hot sun on his back no longer

caused him discomfort but, instead, invited him to turn and run from the blackness facing him.

Greed, however, would not let Emmet retreat. He wanted the gold. No, more than that, he needed the gold. Emmet hated to work, had always hated to work. All of his life, almost fifty years now, he'd been looking for the gold at the end of the rainbow. Howling Cave was his chance to find that rainbow. The gold in Howling Cave had to be plentiful, just waiting to be taken from its limestone walls. For so many years no one had dared enter the cave. It wouldn't be played out like all the other caves, mines, and rivers in the Mother Lode.

Scout whined, the dog's wet nose touching Emmet's hand.

Emmet looked down at the German Shepherd and was suddenly aware of how really scared the dog was. Scout's tail was down between his legs, and his fearful eyes glanced back and forth between the mouth of the cave and Emmet's own scared face.

"Stay here, boy," Emmet said, "I won't be long." He prayed to God those words would prove to be true. "I won't be long," he said again, patting Scout on the head.

Gold. Think of the gold.

Emmet switched on the light of his helmet. He took one last deep breath of stifling air before entering the mouth of

Howling Cave.

Once inside, the beam of his light stabbed at the surrounding darkness, revealing ominous-looking crystalline formations. Mineral bearing water had formed columns that looked like rows of giant teeth, some broken into stalactites and stalagmites, ready to chew and devour him if he dared to enter further.

Gold. Think of the gold.

A blast of cool air hit Emmet in the face.

THE CAVE'S ALIVE. ALIVE AND BREATHING.

It can't be alive. Think of the gold. The cave is not alive.

BUT THE MONSTER IS.

No monsters. Only gold. So much gold.

Emmet walked cautiously through the rows of teeth. The ground underneath his feet became spongy, like walking on a giant tongue.

Think of the gold.

Emmet stopped at the top of a steep incline. Looking down, he directed the beam of his light onto the surrounding rock walls but found no evidence of gold. As he started down the incline, trying to keep both his balance and his hold on the heavy mattock at the same time, Emmet had the sickening feeling of being swallowed whole. With ten yards to go, he slid down the remaining throat into a large

chamber deep within the stomach of the cave. Pink rock formations lined the walls of the chamber. Parts of human skeletons lay scattered around Emmet's feet.

Emmet couldn't move, the sight of the bones freezing him with fear.

Gold. Emmet told himself. Think of gold.

BUT WHAT KILLED THESE PEOPLE? HOW LONG HAVE THEY BEEN HERE?

Emmet would not look down at the bones.

THE MONSTER KILLED THEM.

Instead, he concentrated on looking for the gold. The beam of light from his helmet scanned the surrounding walls. The pink rock formations were beautiful, but there was no sign of gold anywhere.

"Damn," the sound of his own voice made Emmet jump. "There has to be gold," he whispered.

Emmet avoided the scattered remains, carefully walking to the wall nearest him. He slipped the mattock from his shoulder, slowly raised it over his head, and sent the pick end crashing into the wall. The sound of metal on rock echoed all around him. Emmet imagined the cave screaming in agonizing pain. The pink rock formation broke away easily, but there was no gold underneath.

"There has to be gold," Emmet whispered, "there has to be."

He scanned the room, seeing an opening on the far side of the chamber. It looked like a tunnel leading to another chamber.

LEADING TO THE MONSTER.

Emmet would have to venture deeper into the body of the cave to find his gold.

Emmet hesitated. He did not want to explore the next chamber.

The gold is in there. Isn't it?

Emmet heard a strange whirring sound and felt something brush against his left ear. He dropped the mattock and ducked away, but the sound seemed to circle his head. He swatted wildly at the air around both ears, stumbling backwards and losing the miner's helmet as he crashed to the chamber floor.

Emmet lay in the darkness, breathing hard, skeletal remains all around him, feeling panicky and foolish.

Something landed on Emmet's face. He felt it quickly move from his cheek to his nose, forcing its way into his left nostril. As it moved upward a horrible pressure began to build in Emmet's nose and behind his left eye. A pressure so intense Emmet thought his face was going to burst into a thousand tiny pieces of tissue and bone. Emmet had to get it out. Whatever it was he had to get it out.

SUCK....

Emmet tore at his own face. His fingers dug into his eyes and nose.

...THE SOUL....

Blood streamed down his face, but Emmet did not stop digging.

...RIGHT OUT OF A MAN.

The pressure was maddening.

Emmet's fingers ripped at his face.

SUCK THE SOUL RIGHT OUT OF A MAN.

Emmet screamed.

* * *

Emmet staggered from the mouth of the cave, spat out like a piece of bad meat. His torn and bloodied head jerked with a maddening tic as he slowly stumbled toward his dog.

"Scout," Emmet's voice barely escaped his lips, "come here, boy."

Emmet fell to the ground. He rolled onto his back, gasping for air. As he lay in the red dirt, Emmet felt Scout's hot breath against his cheek.

"Scout," he whispered.

Scout answered with a deep, menacing growl. It was the last thing Emmet heard before he died.

Chapter 1

"Bill!"

Maggie screamed her husband's name. She moved as quickly as she could down the darkened hallway, struggling to stay on her feet. The floor rocked underneath her like the fun house at an amusement park. She lost her footing, crashing into the wall on her right. She tried to regain her balance, but the floor rocked to the left, throwing her into the opposite wall.

"Bill!"

Maggie fell to her knees.

Bill stood at the end of the hallway, a soft, warm light glowing all around him. He seemed unaware of the growing danger, but somehow Maggie knew if she didn't get to him quickly, he would die.

"Bill!" Maggie screamed again.

Bill didn't respond. For some reason, he didn't hear her.

Maggie tried to push up onto her feet, but the rocking

floor threw her across the hallway. Her back and head hit the wall with a tremendous thud. As the floor rocked again, Maggie fell forward. She screamed her husband's name as her face smashed against the rocking floor.

Maggie lay on her stomach, riding the floor as if it were a surf board with a giant wave underneath her. Looking up, she saw the silhouette of a man behind Bill. He had been hiding in the shadows, waiting, plotting to kill her husband. Somehow she had known he was there all along. Somehow she could feel his wicked intent.

"Bill!"

The man crept silently up behind Bill; his face still veiled in shadows.

"Bill!"

Bill looked up, suddenly aware that Maggie was calling his name.

"Maggie...."

A wire around Bill's throat squelched his last words.

Maggie tried to push herself up onto her feet, but the floor threw her against the wall.

The man pulled the wire tighter.

Bill fell to his knees.

Being thrown from wall to wall, Maggie could do nothing but watch as Bill tried to pry his fingers between the wire and his throat. When the life finally drained from

Bill's face, the light around him went out.

The floor was still.

Maggie pulled herself up into a sitting position. She leaned against one wall, sobbing into her hands. In the dark, Maggie whispered her husband's name over and over in the hope of bringing him back to life.

"Mom!"

The sound of Billy's voice shook Maggie from her grief.

"Mom! Mom!"

"Billy?" Maggie mumbled.

Maggie took her hands away from her face, squinting from the bright lights that now surrounded her.

"Mom!"

Still squinting, eyes beginning to adjust, Maggie could see her little boy running down the hallway towards her.

"Mom!"

The man was dead on Billy's heels. His hand reached out for Billy's hair, inches away from grabbing the boy.

"Billy!"

As Maggie pushed up onto her feet, the floor began to rock.

"Billy!"

Maggie crashed into the wall.

The man grabbed Billy's hair.

"Mom. Mom."

Maggie sat up in bed. Her breath rushed from her lungs. Her heart pounded within her chest. Beads of perspiration plastered the bangs of Maggie's short-cropped hair to her forehead. The nightgown she was wearing stuck to her body.

"Mom."

Maggie was hot but shivered as she pushed back the heavy comforter. She climbed out of bed. The air felt cold against her damp skin, but it was really the nightmare that sent shivers racing up and down her spine. The same damn nightmare that had plagued her dreams since Bill's murder. After more than two years, she had come to expect it to haunt her sleep. When she had finally learned to brace herself for it each night, the horrible nightmare almost seemed bearable.

But now it was different. After moving back to Starkville, Billy suddenly became a part of the nightmare. It was Billy's role that put new fear into Maggie; fear that gripped her heart and squeezed with ice-cold fingers.

"Mom. Mom."

Billy's voice sounded groggy through the portable intercom. Maggie sighed with relief, sure that he was not really awake, at least not all the way. She plucked her robe from the chair by the doorway, wrapping it around her damp

body as she crept down the hallway and entered Billy's room.

The first year after his father's death, Billy usually woke at least once during the night: screaming. By the second year the screaming had gradually stopped. Now most nights he slept straight through. Still, every third or fourth night he would wake up, breathing hard, gasping for air, calling for Maggie to come and lie down beside him.

"Mom. Mom."

"I'm here, baby. Mom's here." Maggie sat beside him on the bed.

Billy had wrapped himself in his blankets like a caterpillar in a giant safety cocoon. His eyes fluttered, trying to open.

"It's okay, baby," Maggie repeated, "I'm here."

"I'm not a baby anymore," Billy whispered through a sleepy smile. His eyes were never able to open all the way. Soon he was breathing evenly: lips slightly parted, deep in a peaceful sleep.

Maggie sat on the edge of the bed, looking into Billy's angelic face. As she thought about what Billy had said, she realized he was right. Billy was not a baby anymore, and he told her so whenever she called him that, which was often. He was an eight-year-old boy, growing fast, intelligent and sensitive beyond those eight years. "You'll always be my

little baby though," Maggie whispered, pushing back his blonde hair and kissing him on the forehead.

Looking at her son always reminded Maggie of Bill. Billy had inherited his father's blonde hair rather than Maggie's dark brown hair.

"I miss you, Bill," Maggie whispered, seeing her dead husband's face in Billy's. "I miss you so much."

Bill was a very special man. She loved him from the first time they met, and she knew he loved her too. When she looked in Bill's eyes she saw love and excitement. She knew Bill thought she was beautiful. No one had ever looked at her in quite that way before. No one had ever made her feel beautiful before. She wasn't ugly or even plain, she knew that, but her whole life friends and family had always told her how cute she was. Maggie hated looking cute. Cute was for puppy dogs. Cute was for babies. Cute was not for a grown woman. But, even though she was of average height and had a better than average figure, Maggie was cursed with a round, baby-like face and big, blue eyes. At forty years old, with her hair cut short, Maggie not only looked younger than her age but still looked like her baby pictures. Her body had grown up, became a woman, but her face had remained the same as when she was a toddler. She still looked cute. Bill, however, thought she was beautiful. Bill thought she was sexy. She loved him for that.

"I do miss you, Bill." Maggie stood up. "But I have you in my son." She touched Billy on the cheek. "I love you, baby," she whispered, looking down at Billy's sleeping face one last time before turning away. She quietly tiptoed back to her room.

Not able to sleep, Maggie stood at her second-story bedroom window. She stared out at the Stark Ranch, fifty acres of her great-grandfather's original two hundred acre property. The rest had been sold off over the years in bits and pieces.

Although dwindled down to just those fifty acres, the valley making up Stark Ranch was still good land. The Stark Creek sliced through the property, separating a lush pasture and small apple orchard from the main house, chicken coop, barn, two smaller cabins, and (because the cabins did not have indoor plumbing) an outhouse.

On one side of the house, a magnificent wall of mountain shot up into the sky. On the other side, the valley spread itself out away from the house. The chicken coop and barn were a short walk up a hill covered with the prickly heads of wild thistle. With stems almost four feet tall, the thistle grew rampantly down the valley on that side of the creek. It surrounded the two dilapidated cabins and outhouse, attacking the entire country side before finally disappearing into a dense forest of pine trees.

Past the back of the house, the creek ran with the exuberance of a small child, separating the house from the pasture on the other side. The front of the house looked out on to what was once a garden, a small patch of green lawn, and a walkway separating the two.

When Maggie's mother was alive the garden had been alive as well, a rainbow of flowers greeting visitors and saying good-bye as they left. Since her death it, too, had died. Now it was nothing more than a graveyard of weeds and dirt. The picket fence surrounding the garden and lawn (once new and freshly painted) was nothing but bare wood, falling over, no longer protecting the land inside its feeble gate. Beyond the fence, a gravel road lazily wound its way down from the main road above the ranch. In front of the gate, the gravel road circled a large walnut tree where Maggie parked her pickup truck.

The house itself was over a hundred years old. Unlike the two smaller cabins rotting away with age and neglect, the house was still sturdy and livable. Although two stories, it was not at all large.

A tan, pebbly asphalt siding covered the outside walls. The roof was nothing more than tin, rusted from years of pounding rain and snow. A narrow, wooden porch lined the entire front of the house. A large screened-in porch, raised above the ground slanting away underneath it, lined the back

of the house.

Inside the house, Maggie's great-grandfather had used linoleum tiles on the floor of each room. He had painted the walls to match whatever color the tiles happened to be. Most of the furniture, either handmade or purchased over the years through the Sears, Roebuck & Company catalogue, was almost as old as the house, worn with age and use.

The living room was long and narrow, with two French doors. A large picture window looked out onto the porch and what was once the garden. A pump organ, originally owned by Maggie's great-grandmother, Susan Stark, stood against the back wall, forgotten, silent for years. Against the inside wall stood two handmade bookcases, its shelves stuffed with old books. On top of the bookcases, amid stacks of tattered magazines, sat a hurricane lamp and a heavy-looking, black rotary phone. A Sears Silvertone radio, its cabinet scratched and marred, stood next to the bookcases. The Silvertone, bought during World War II, was no longer in working condition. A round oak table stood in the middle of the room, flanked by a handmade rocking chair (painted green by Maggie's grandfather) and a Morris chair. Made of oak, the Morris chair had an adjustable reclining back. Years of sunlight had faded its thick, flower-patterned cushions.

Separating the living room from the kitchen was the dining room, furnished with nothing more than a long oak

table, six matching chairs, and a wood burning stove. Next to the doorway hung an 1879 wall telephone—a mahogany box with bells on top, a hand-crank, and separate receiver and transmitter.

The kitchen was as long and even more narrow than the living room. Its windows looked out onto the green patch of lawn, the rising hill of thistle, and the chicken coop. A kitchen counter, with built-in sink and cabinets, lined the wall under the windows. An electric stove and refrigerator stood against the wall opposite it. A square, handmade table with matching chairs stood at the front of the kitchen.

Off the kitchen was a bathroom as small as a closet, with nothing more than a sink, toilet, and stand-up shower.

The master bedroom in the back of the house was empty and unused. A door in the bedroom opened up onto the screened-in porch. The old cot (where Maggie's grandmother had always slept, claiming it was too hot inside the house even in the dead of winter) still stood in the corner.

Upstairs there was a larger bathroom. Maggie was grateful this one had a tub so she could continue the habit of taking late night baths with a stack of her favorite magazines. There were also two small bedrooms.

Billy's bedroom was at the front of the house, closest to the stairs. The room was once Maggie's and still furnished with the bed and two nightstands she had as a little girl.

Billy had made the room his own by scattering toys on the floor. He also hung posters of Bart Simpson and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers on the wall. His special night light looked like a space shuttle glowing next to his bed.

Maggie's bedroom was at the back of the house. As a little girl, Maggie had been afraid of being alone upstairs, especially at night. So her parents had moved their furniture, a complete bedroom suite made of oak—bed, dresser, and washstand, up from the master bedroom. Now, after all those years, the furniture was still there. To Maggie it seemed natural for her to stay in her Mom and Dad's old room.

From her window Maggie could look out on the creek and pasture where ten head of beef cattle grazed on the tall grass and munched on fallen apples. Tonight the full moon hung low in the sky. Its reflection, glistening in the creek, looked like gold peering up through the water. As Maggie listened to the steady clang of cow bells, she wondered if that was how the creek looked in the gold rush days. According to legend, many a miner made their fortune in just one day of panning in the South Fork of the Mokelumne River. Since Stark Creek flowed into the Mokelumne, gold was also plentiful where John Stark had made his home over a hundred and forty years ago. According to the same legend, miners plucked gold nuggets from Stark Creek the

size of a man's fist.

Something moved along the creek bank, startling Maggie from of her thoughts. Something, just a shadow, darted through the thistle, into the cover of the pine trees. Maggie stared into the dense blackness of the trees, waiting for another glimpse of whatever was out there.

While she waited, Maggie's mind drifted to other stories of the Mother Lode Country. Stories filled with gruesome images of hardship and violence. The gold rush days were rough times. Not all stories of that period had gold nuggets or riches beyond wildest dreams in them.

Gooseflesh formed on Maggie's scalp, feeling like thousands of tiny spiders running rampant through her hair.

Something moved again.

Maggie jumped from her thoughts.

The shadow moved within a fringe of blackness between the trees and the moonlit creek. It charged into the light of the moon, crossed the creek, and ran on all fours into the pasture.

"Just a dog," Maggie whispered.

The spiders scurried to the base of Maggie's skull. They began creeping down her neck.

Twisting and turning, the dog ran back across the pasture in a wild frenzy. At the top of the creek bank it stopped. It swung its head back and forth before scrambling

down into the water, splashing and running until the blackness of night swallowed it from sight.

The spiders were on Maggie's shoulders now, beginning to crawl down her back.

Maggie realized she had been holding her breath. When she released it from the prison of her lungs, the words she whispered escaped with that long held breath. "Just a dog."

SOMETHING ABOUT THE DOG WAS NOT RIGHT!
Her mind screamed back at her.

Maggie ignored her own instincts as she turned away from the window. She crossed the room and climbed back into bed. "Just a dog," she told herself again, pulling the comforter up to her chin.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE DOG WAS NOT RIGHT!

Maggie closed her eyes.

The face of a snarling dog invaded her mind. Sitting up, Maggie stared toward the window. She half expected to see the dog's wild eyes peering in at her.

"Just a dog." Her own words fell flat, her mind unconvinced.

The spiders spread out across her entire body.

Maggie huddled down beneath the comforter, staring at the window.

* * *

A high, penetrating shrill echoed through the night,

jarring Joe and Elsie from a peaceful sleep. They both dressed quickly. Joe pulled overalls haphazardly up over his flannel nightshirt. Elsie shoved her nightgown down into a pair of slacks and covered herself with an old cardigan sweater. After Joe grabbed a flashlight from his top dresser drawer, they moved as quickly as a man of sixty-two and a woman of fifty-nine could: down the stairs, across the living room, and through the kitchen. Joe and Elsie were still in bare feet as they rushed out onto the wooden deck that had been built directly off their backdoor and extended out on top of a rock wall. Joe and Elsie stopped at the railing. From there, they looked directly down on to a long and narrow dirt terrace almost six feet below. Joe swept the beam of his flashlight across the terrace.

Nothing.

"What do you think it is, Joe?" Elsie whispered as she leaned over the railing, trying to see.

Joe turned away without answering.

"Joe?" Elsie said as the beam of light disappeared, making it impossible for her to see the terrace below. "Joe?" She looked up to find Joe had gone. He was already off the deck, moving down the long hedge separating the backyard from the top of the rock wall.

The hedge was less than three feet high. Behind the hedge, between it and the wall, Elsie had planted five tree

roses. Joe stopped halfway down the hedge, shining the light between the rose trees.

Elsie quickly moved to Joe's side again, trying to follow the beam of his light with her own eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of anything that might be moving below.

Still nothing.

The terrible cries continued.

"Joe?" Elsie whispered, tugging on his flannel nightshirt.

"Shhh. Come on," Joe said. He turned away again.

Elsie was right behind him, following the sound of the painful cries past the bird bath where the hedge abruptly ended, through the gate between the hedge and the tool shed, and down the stone steps.

Joe and Elsie stepped up onto a retaining wall, the safety of their house six feet above them and at least an eight yard run from the gate to the backdoor. Joe had built the retaining wall along the creek bank four years earlier to keep his property from sliding and eroding away due to the heavy rains. Standing on top of the wall, Joe and Elsie were only one foot above the terraced ground but four feet above the sloping creek bank. Below, Stark Creek flowed through a thick forest of oak, dogwood, and pine trees. All along the creek bank, brittle fern, wild roses, deerweed, poison oak, and thickets of blackberry vines grew at the base of the

trees.

Joe moved the beam of his flashlight all around the trees and dense foliage but still could not see what was making the God-awful noise.

Scared, Elsie moved as close to her husband as she could without knocking him off the wall and down into the thickets below. So Joe wouldn't notice, she looked at his face out of the corner of her eye. In the dark, with just the glow from his flashlight, Joe looked much older than his sixty-two years. The backlash from the light accentuated the lines in his face, making them look like deep crevices. He was badly in need of a shave. His gray hair was wild, flying out in all directions. His eyes, though, are what really caught Elsie's attention: They were as round as silver dollars.

He looked scared.

Living where they did (three miles outside Starkville, with the creek running through the bottom of their property) Joe and Elsie often had to deal with wild animals. Raccoons, possums and such roamed the creek bank and surrounding woods all the time. Occasionally they saw a deer or two drinking from the creek. Even rarer, but not unheard of, a gray fox or valley coyote would come down from the higher elevations looking for prey. However, in thirty-five years, they had never heard anything make a sound as terrifying as

the one that now pierced through the night air.

"What do you think it is, Joe?" Elsie tried to hide her fear but her voice quivered, giving her away. When Joe glanced at her, Elsie had to wonder what he saw. Did she look old and haggard? Was her gray hair flying out of control, creating the illusion of an old witch, windblown after a too speedy flight on her broomstick? Were her eyes bugging out of their sockets just like Joe's?

"Don't know," Joe answered this time, his own voice quivering slightly. He scratched at the stubble on his chin as if trying to look calm. "Small animal, probably a possum, squirrel, or maybe a bird."

They continued to scan the creek bank, but the beam of the flashlight was unable to penetrate through the thick brush more than a few feet.

"Whatever it is though," Joe continued, "it's hurt bad and more than just a little scared."

The shrill grew louder, more frantic.

Shivering, Elsie hugged herself. She told herself that it was her bare feet and the cold mountain air that caused the chill to run the length of her spinal cord and explode onto her scalp. After all, even though the days were sunny, there was a hint of fall in the air, and the September nights usually dipped well into the forties. Deep down, though, Elsie knew it was not her bare feet or the cold night air. It

was the cold hand of fear that shook her body; fear of whatever else was out there.

"Scared of what?" Elsie asked.

Joe shook his head. "Should've brought the Winchester," was how he answered Elsie's question.

A deep growl rumbled through the trees just as one last desperate screech filled the air.

Then all was silent.

"Shit!" Joe swallowed hard. "What in God's name was that?"

Elsie didn't offer an answer. She stood on the retaining wall, hugging herself, frozen with fear.

The growl came again, then movement in the brush.

"Come on, Joe," Elsie said, grabbing Joe's arm and pulling. "Let's get inside!"

Whatever it was, it moved along the creek bank, leaves crunching, twigs snapping.

"Just a minute," Joe said, pulling his arm free. He pointed the light in the direction of the noise. His hand trembled; the beam of light jumped up and down in the trees.

Elsie stared down into the dimly lit trees, trying to follow the beam of light, but deep down she did not really want to catch a glimpse of whatever had stalked (and apparently killed) the small animal.

Then, the thing in the brush suddenly changed directions. It seemed to quicken its pace, moving straight up the creek bank toward the retaining wall.

Elsie hoped Joe would follow her as she turned and stepped down from the retaining wall. She ran across the terrace and bolted up the stone steps faster than any fifty-nine year old woman should be able to run. She didn't stop until she heard Joe's loud curse from below.

He was still down by the wall.

From behind the hedge, Elsie turned and yelled, "Come on, Joe!"

It was too late.

She saw Joe drop the flashlight. He stumbled backwards and fell to the ground. The beam of the fallen flashlight focused on the head and front paws of a large German Shepherd as it tried to scramble over the retaining wall. Missing the four foot high jump from the creek bank, the dog scratched at the terrace dirt with its front paws. Even from the upper terrace, Elsie could hear the dog's back paws click against the cement wall. The white foam that bubbled around the corners of the dog's mouth hung like string from its snout.

The dog was mad.

"Joe, run!" Elsie screamed.

"Get the Winchester!" Joe picked up a fallen tree

branch as he climbed to his feet.

"Joe!"

"Get the goddamn Winchester!"

The dog was over the wall, lunging for Joe's throat. Joe swung the branch.

Elsie heard a dull thud as it struck the dog in the ribs. The dog went down, stunned for only a few seconds before it was on its feet again, circling Joe.

Elsie ran for the backdoor. She tore through the kitchen and into the living room, gasping for air, heart drumming against her ribcage, temples throbbing. Elsie quickly took the Winchester down from the rack over the fireplace, released the safety, and cocked the lever action of the already loaded rifle. She ran as fast as she could, back the way she had come, praying to God that she was not too late, praying to God that Joe was still alive.

Once outside, Elsie stopped behind the hedge, scanning the terrace below for Joe and the dog. Within the eerie glow of the fallen flashlight, she could see Joe on the ground, kicking his feet up at the dog's head. The dog growled and snapped its teeth together as it continued to circle Joe.

Elsie quickly raised the Winchester to eye level, the walnut stock resting against her shoulder as she took aim. Just as the dog lunged at Joe, Elsie squeezed the trigger. The shot cracked through the night air. Without taking a

breath, Elsie quickly cocked the Winchester again, firing another round into the already fallen dog.

With the sound of gunfire still ringing in her ears, Elsie watched Joe struggle to his feet. "Be careful, Joe. It might not be dead," she yelled, cocking the Winchester again and aiming it at the dog. She nervously watched as Joe knelt down to check the dog for any sign of life.

"It's dead," Joe called back.

Relieved, Elsie lowered the Winchester.

"By God, Elsie, it's Scout!" Joe called up to her.

"What?" Elsie almost raised the Winchester and took aim again when she heard the alarm in Joe's voice. "What did you say, Joe?"

"Get down here, Elsie. This is Emmet's dog, Scout."

"Emmet's dog?" Elsie mumbled to herself as she hurried down the side of the hedge. She pushed through the wooden gate and started down the stone steps.

"My God! What's that!"

Those were the last words Elsie heard before the long, agonizing sound of Joe's scream stopped her cold in her tracks. The scream stabbed at her heart like a knife, the cold steel of its blade twisting within her as the scream rose to a fevered pitch of terror. She could not inhale or exhale, her breath frozen in her lungs.

In the deathly silence that followed, Elsie's senses

started to return: Joe was in desperate trouble and needed help. As her lungs thawed, breath escaping in short, painful gasps, Elsie willed her body to move. She stumbled down the remaining stone steps, her mind screaming at her that the dog was still alive.

Elsie walked slowly across the terrace, following the raised barrel of the Winchester. In her imagination she saw the dog leaping out of the shadows, snarling, teeth snapping, ready to tear her throat open. However, in the soft glow of Joe's flashlight, the beam flickering from draining batteries, Elsie could see two dark shapes lying on the ground. The first one was the dog, lying still, not breathing. Confused, Elsie lowered the Winchester as she slowly moved around the dead body and knelt down beside Joe. She placed her trembling hand on Joe, choking back tears as she felt his chest rise and fall with erratic breathing.

He was alive.

Leaning closer, Elsie examined Joe for possible injuries. Blood trickled from his right ear, but there were no visible signs of a wound or bite. His facial features twitched and contorted as if in pain, but Elsie could not figure out why.

"Joe," she whispered, "can you hear me?"

"...in me...." Joe mumbled, his eyes still closed.

"What? Joe, what did you say?"

"...in me...it's in me...."

"What's in you? Joe, what are talking about?"

"It's in me."

Unable to understand, Elsie tried a new approach. "Joe, can you stand? Can you get up?"

"...in me...in me...."

"Joe, don't do this. Come on, get up!" Hunkering down, Elsie pulled on the front of Joe's overalls. "Joe, get up! You have to help me!"

Slowly, Joe rose to his feet. He leaned on Elsie, his arm around her shoulder, and mumbled into her ear.

"It's in me."

The implication of what Joe said scared Elsie to death. She tried desperately to ignore him. Instead, she concentrated on getting him back inside the house. She used the stock of the Winchester as a cane to support them, moving slowly across the terrace to the stone steps. After what seemed like hours struggling up the steps, they pushed through the wooden gate, shuffled down the hedge, stepped up onto the wooden deck, and somehow made it through the back door.

"...in me...it's in me...in me...."

Once inside, Elsie maneuvered Joe around the kitchen table, through the doorway to the living room, and onto the couch.

"...it's in me...in me...it's in me...."

Those words slammed into Elsie like a thunderbolt as she looked into Joe's pain-riddled face.

"...it's in me...."

What the hell did he mean? What was in him?

"Joe," she said, "I'm going to get help. You're going to be okay. I promise, you're going to be okay."

"...in me...it's in me...."

Elsie's cheeks felt wet as she stood up. She walked back into the kitchen, tasting the salt from her own tears as they streamed to the corners of her mouth. She softly placed the Winchester on the kitchen table before crossing the room to the wall phone.

In me! It's in me!

Those words slammed through her again as she picked up the receiver.

It's in me!

Elsie closed her eyes. She listened to the soft, steady hum of the dial tone. She had to be strong. Joe needed her.

It's in me!

Elsie opened her eyes. She had to concentrate on keeping her hand steady as she punched out the number to Doc Brown's home.

* * *

It was late. Doctor Ed Brown sat in the dark, a glass of

Chivas Regal in one hand, the index finger of the other hand absently rubbing around the rim of the glass. Although he had slipped out of his black shoes and discarded the gray jacket of his suit on the living room floor, Doc had not yet undressed. He still wore the matching gray slacks with a white shirt, the top button undone, sleeves rolled to the elbows. His burgundy tie hung loose and askew.

Doc listened to the phone ring for the second time, thought about answering it, but the intoxicated feeling in his brain kept him from rising out of the chair. He had been drinking heavily all night, trying to drown his fears in a river of scotch whiskey.

The phone rang again.

What if it's an emergency, he thought. *Someone in desperate need of medical attention.* He stared into his glass. Although he felt disgusted with himself, Doc made no attempt to get out of the chair.

Doc had always prided himself on being in control; in control of his emotions; his fears; his secret. More and more, however, he felt that control slipping away. Tonight, he could not control his thoughts or his urges. That was his biggest fear of all.

Even the whiskey didn't help.

The phone continued to ring. How many times? Six, or maybe seven? He had lost count.

He needed to be strong. His entire life revolved around being in control, hiding his secret.

At forty-nine years old, with brown eyes, the temples of his brown hair just beginning to gray, and a thin mustache similar to the one Tyrone Power had in *The Mark of Zorro*, Doc cut a very handsome figure. He was not very tall, only 5' 10", but was still as slim and muscular as when he played high school football. He dated a variety of women, creating the perfect illusion of an eligible bachelor.

But it was all a lie.

His newest lie was Maggie Stark. Although he had been casually dating her since she moved back to Starkville, it was not Maggie that filled his thoughts. He was thinking of her son, Billy, again: Billy's big, blue eyes; blonde, wavy hair; and soft, pale skin.

No! Stop thinking of the boy!

"Damn!" He threw the glass across the room. The glass shattered against the wall, whiskey splashing out in all directions.

Doc knew he would never let himself lose control, but his thoughts and urges scared the hell out of him. There had been other boys through the years that had stirred a similar desire, mostly patients or boys on the football team he coached, but he had never acted on those urges. He had always been strong, in control. His secret was still safe. He

would keep it that way, determined to take it to the grave.

The phone stopped in mid-ring.

Doc slowly rose from his chair. He stumbled toward the kitchen, feeling his way through the dark. He was in dire need of coffee. Someone might call again, probably in need of medical attention. He needed to be sober. He needed to be strong. He needed to be in control.

* * *

Elsie placed the receiver back on the hook; Doc Brown wasn't at home. She wiped the tears from her face, unsure of what to do next. After taking a deep breath, she walked back to the living room. She needed to check on Joe.

He was gone.

Elsie walked to the couch. She felt the patchwork patterned cushion. It was still warm, but where was he? Was he feeling better? "Joe," she called, "are you here?"

Joe didn't answer.

Upstairs, something crashed to the floor, glass shattering.

"Joe," Elsie called as she walked to the bottom of the stairs, "are you up there?"

A loud thump answered Elsie's call.

"Joe, is that you?"

The thump answered again.

Sweet Jesus, what now? Hasn't this night been terrible

enough?

Elsie started up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, she stopped and listened. The thumping sound had grown louder. It was now a steady, rhythmic banging that seemed to be coming from their bedroom.

Scared, but not sure why, Elsie walked hesitantly toward the bedroom. She stopped just outside the doorway. "Joe? Are you in there?"

The banging continued, coming from inside the bedroom's private bath.

Elsie entered the bedroom, moving as quickly as she could around the footboard of the bed. She stopped just outside the closed bathroom door. Tentatively, she reached for the doorknob. Slowly, she turned it.

Locked.

"Joe!" She slapped the door with the palm of her hand. "Joe, answer me!"

The banging stopped.

"Go away!" Joe answered.

His voice sounded strange. Not just the tone, abrupt and cold, but it was deeper, gravely.

"Joe! You're scaring me! Open the door!"

The banging started again, steady and rhythmic, like a drum.

What the hell was he doing in there?

"Joe," Elsie hit the bathroom door with her fist, "open the door!"

The banging abruptly stopped. The only sound Elsie could hear was the pounding of her own heart. She jumped and took two steps backwards when she heard the doorknob rattle. She watched with growing apprehension as the doorknob slowly turned. Even though she desperately wanted Joe to come out, a part of her was still afraid.

What am I afraid of? she thought, hands nervously rubbing up and down the arms of her sweater as she hugged herself. *He's my husband for Christ sake. He's not a monster. He's hurt. He needs my help.*

Elsie felt ashamed but still could not shake her fear.

The door creaked open. Joe slumped in the doorway. He slowly raised his twitching head. His forehead was red and swollen from where he had continuously banged it into the bathroom wall. As he gazed at Elsie, his eyes were a mixture of agony and madness.

He's my husband. He needs me.

"Joe?" Elsie took two steps towards him. She reached out, touching Joe's cheek. "Tell me what's wrong."

Joe grabbed her wrist, twisting it hard to one side. Just as Elsie began to scream with pain, his other hand was around her throat. His fingers squeezed against the back of

her neck. His thumb dug into her windpipe. "I told you to go away," his voice croaked, no longer sounding like Joe at all. "I warned you."

Elsie couldn't breathe. She thought her neck would snap in two. *Joe!* Her mind screamed as she frantically scratched at Joe's wrist with her free hand. *Stop! I love you!*

Joe didn't stop.

Moving forward, Joe pushed her back into the bedroom until Elsie's shoulders and head slammed against the wall. "I warned you." A malicious sneer spread across his face.

Elsie's head throbbed with pain. She stared into a face that no longer seemed recognizable: Wild eyes stared back at her, and drool ran from the corners of Joe's sneer.

"I wwwwaaarned yyyyouuu...." Joe's voice sounded as if he were under water.

Elsie's vision began to blur.

"I wwwwwwaaarned yyyyyyyouuu...."

Elsie's world quickly turned black. Joe's warbled voice was the only thing telling her she was still alive.

"I wwwwwwwaaaaaaaarrrrrrned...."

On the very edge of life and death, Elsie raised a knee into Joe's crotch. She heard the echoes of a groan, but Joe's hand still clutched at her throat. She put her knee into him again, and suddenly she found herself coughing and gasping for air. Elsie swayed back and forth, her throat burning, her

returning vision filled with floating, black spots. Joe was kneeling at her feet, doubled over with pain. Her first conscious thought was to go to him: He needed her. As she regained her senses, however, she realized he was no longer the man she loved. Somehow, he had become a monster.

Elsie maneuvered around him, stumbling for the door. After three steps she felt Joe's hand around her ankle. She tried to wrench herself free of his grasp, but he squeezed her ankle tighter, pulling on her leg. Elsie fell backwards, her head just missing the foot of the bed but crashing to the floor. Thunder rolled through Elsie's head as she fought to hold onto consciousness.

Joe crawled on top of her, straddling her waist. The weight of his body pressed into her stomach. He wrapped his hands around her neck, pressing his thumbs into her windpipe.

Elsie fought back. She scratched at Joe's face, leaving deep gouges across his cheeks. Joe shook his head, trying to keep her hands away, but she found his eyes with her fingernails.

Joe screamed. Releasing Elsie's throat, Joe's hands shot to his own face, covering his eyes.

Elsie pushed Joe from on top of her, his body thumping to the floor, his screams filling her ears with piercing shrills, much the same as that small animal in the woods.

She tried not to listen. She tried not to care.

He's not my husband anymore! He's not Joe!

Elsie rolled over, pushing herself up onto her hands and knees.

He's not Joe!

She crawled to the bedroom door. When Joe's screams died to low groans of pain, Elsie knew he was regaining his senses, regaining his vision. He would soon be on top of her again. She quickened her pace, managing to push herself up onto her feet as she made it to the door. Once in the hallway, she used her hand on the wall to support her wobbly legs and guide herself to the stairs.

Elsie started down the stairs. She clutched the banister with her right hand. Her head felt dizzy. Her eyes couldn't focus.

"Elsie," Joe croaked her name.

God! He's right behind me!

Elsie quickened her steps, head swimming with panic.

"Elsie!"

Joe's voice sounded hideous.

As she glanced over her shoulder, Elsie slipped. Her legs buckled underneath her. She pitched face forward down the remaining stairs.

Elsie took a deep breath as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. A sharp pain stabbed at her lungs, cutting

her breath short.

Elsie looked up the stairs. Joe wasn't there.

Ignoring the pain, Elsie reached for the banister, pulling herself to her feet. She staggered across the living room, almost lunging through the doorway toward the kitchen table and the Winchester.

Elsie leaned against the table, taking shallow breaths of air. She could hear Joe's thundering footsteps on the stairs.

"Elsie!" Joe's voice croaked again.

He was in the living room.

"Elsie!"

Elsie reached for the Winchester, the pain shooting across her chest.

"Elsie!"

He was getting closer.

Elsie released the safety of the already cocked Winchester but still was not sure she could really shoot her husband.

"Elsie!"

He's not my husband! Somehow he's changed!

Elsie curled her finger around the trigger.

"Elsie! Elsie!"

He was behind her.

Elsie whirled around. As she brought the Winchester

up, she took aim.

"Elsie!" Joe slouched in the doorway, glaring at her from across the room. His scratched and bloodied face twitched on his shoulders. He moved slowly toward her. "You bitch!" Spit flew from his mouth.

"Stay away, Joe!" Elsie backpedaled in the direction of the door. "I don't want to shoot you!"

"Bitch!" Joe rushed her, grabbing for the barrel of the Winchester.

Elsie fired.

The bullet slammed into Joe's shoulder, the force of impact sending him backward. Joe stayed on his feet but swayed from side to side as a leaf caught in a crosswind. "You bitch," he said, trying to steady himself, but his legs finally gave way. He reached toward Elsie as he fell face forward onto the kitchen floor.

Elsie quickly cocked the Winchester. She kept it aimed at Joe. She waited, half expecting him to get up, half expecting him to attack her again.

He didn't move.

After what seemed like hours, but in reality was only a couple of minutes, Elsie lowered the Winchester. She set the rifle down on the kitchen table before slowly going to the wall phone. Elsie leaned against the wall, letting it support her weight. She picked up the receiver, punching out the

number to Doc Brown's. She closed her eyes as she listened to the phone on the other end ring. Her head felt dizzy. Her muscles felt rubbery. The fight had taken everything out of her, sapping her of all her strength, exhausting her of all emotion.

Doc answered on the third ring. "Hello, this is Doctor Brown."

"Doc," Elsie spoke slowly, her voice calm and steady, "this is Elsie Schafer. I need you to come over right away."

Behind her, Joe slowly pushed himself up onto his knees.

"Elsie? Is everything okay?"

"I shot Joe," she said matter-of-factly, no tremor to her voice.

She didn't hear the slight groan as Joe staggered to his feet.

"What? Elsie, what did you say?"

"Please call Deputy Waters for me," she interrupted him, "he should come too."

"Elsie. Tell me what...."

Elsie hung up the phone. She leaned against the wall, continuing to hang onto the receiver, eyes never opening. She wanted nothing more than to sleep for a long, long time.

Joe reached for her.

* * *

Maggie's eyes shot open at the sound of distant gunfire. She had fallen back asleep only to have the stillness of the night shattered by two shots. Maggie sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes and listening for further evidence of her old enemy, death, having followed her into the mountains. As she waited, images of a snarling dog filled her mind. Just like the actual dog earlier, the dog in her mind's eye ran through the pasture in a wild frenzy. She imagined it to be a rabid beast, driven by a maddening and animalistic need for the taste of warm blood.

From there Maggie's thoughts spun out of control. The memory of a horrifying story flashed through her head like an unstoppable storm. This story had a mythical creature causing madness among the miners, ranchers, and people of Starkville. A story meant to scare a little girl, with nothing more than the twinkling stars and roaring campfire to light the night.

Maggie pushed the comforter aside as she climbed out of bed. She crossed the room to the window. She stared out at the creek and pasture where she had seen the dog.

As an adult, Maggie felt embarrassed the story still frightened her. After all, the real world was scary enough. As a homicide detective for the San Francisco Police Department, Maggie had seen enough violence, enough madness, to last her a lifetime. She had spent the last three

years on the force tracking down a serial killer. A man the San Francisco papers called *The Night Strangler*. A man obsessed with his own press coverage. A man obsessed with the woman detective in charge of catching him. A man so insane, he stalked and murdered Maggie's husband, and then left a note pinned to Bill's dead body. The note said: *Catch me ...if you can.*

It would be two more years before Maggie could catch him. Two frightening years, filled with grisly nightmares for herself and her son. During those two years, anger and hatred welled up inside her until she thought she would burst from the need for revenge as a balloon would burst from too much air.

Finally Maggie did catch him.

Shoving the barrel of her .38 Chiefs Special against the killer's forehead, she wanted nothing more than to see his brains splattered across the wall behind him. Why she did not succumb to that need for revenge, she wasn't sure. Something deep inside her—not mercy, not even pity—stopped her. Maybe it was fear, the fear that she would become like the animal she longed to see dead. Whatever that something had been, it did stop her.

Afterward, crime scenes became unbearable for her. She was no longer able to see a victim with an objective eye, looking for clues. A dead body was no longer just a

corpse, but a person with a past; a person with a family left behind. Each victim's face reminded her of Bill and the way he had looked as he lay on the cold, concrete floor of the parking garage, with the wire still wrapped around his throat. Each surviving family member reminded Maggie of herself. The pain shadowing their faces, the loss filling their hearts, stabbed at Maggie's own heart with a renewed vengeance. Maggie was no longer able to do her job effectively. She turned in her badge.

Eager to flee the *City*, Maggie left her house in the hands of a real estate agent before quickly moving back to the home she had known as a little girl. Maggie hoped that high in the Sierra Foothills she and Billy could heal their wounds, make their peace with God, and say good-bye to Bill.

The nightmares, however, continued, taking on the new horrifying twist of Billy's impending death. Maggie felt that death was taunting her, stalking her, no matter where she and Billy hid.

A third shot cracked in the distance. Maggie jumped from her thoughts of the past as if the cold hand of death had shaken her from a deep slumber. She tried to convince herself that the shots she heard were just poachers, hunting illegally late at night so as not to get caught. Instinct, however, told her different. Maggie stared out the window.

Deep down, she knew that death had chased her into the mountains.

Continued in *STARKVILLE*

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