

CHAPTER 1

The dust covered yellow school bus rumbled down the cracked asphalt road, shaking the children inside. Tommy's body was inclined back against his seat, his feet planted at the top of the green vinyl covered seat in front of him. He alternated between glancing at his best friend Brian and peering out the window at the blur of the fading autumn colors along the road. Kevin was sitting rather imperiously at the back of the bus, grimacing down at his cell phone that he removed from his pocket every couple of minutes.

Unable to resist commenting, Carlos leaned across the aisle. "Alright, what's the deal, Kevin? You got a hot date or something?"

Kevin's face flushed slightly. "Uh...yeah! Jealous much?"

Despite his retort, his hands were shaking. Sunlight streaming through the windows revealed a rather puffy ring of black and blue flesh underneath his right eye. Tommy spotted the clumsy attempt to hide the bruise with makeup. For an instant, the two boys' eyes met but Kevin cast his eyes downward, looking ashamed. He looked at his phone again, and Tommy knew why.

A smirk curled across Carlos' lips as he quipped, "Yeah, right. Your left hand isn't a date!" A chorus of chuckles emanated from the kids sitting in front of the group of boys.

Kevin turned to face him and punched the boy in the shoulder with a dull thwack. Before he could say anything, Kevin leaned back in his seat and said, “Just FYI, it’s my right hand.” The children in earshot giggled at Kevin’s assertion.

After rubbing his shoulder, Carlos looked back at Kevin. “Seriously, dude, what’s up?” Tommy looked over at him and discreetly touched his own face, to draw Carlos’ attention to Kevin’s bruise. After Carlos had realized what he meant, the group became quiet.

Kevin put his phone away, leaned back against the window facing his friends and forced a smile. “The only problem I have is your ugly face.” Carlos flipped Kevin off, and poked Jacob who was giggling at his expense.

Tommy glanced at Brian and smiled. When he returned the smile, Tommy looked down, his face brightening. Carlos and Jacob nudged one another and pointed at the pair. Carlos was dozing in the sunlight, while Jacob leaned against him listening to music on his headphones, watching Tommy and Brian with bemused interest.

Kevin shook his head and grinned knowingly back at Jacob. Tommy caught the boys’ conspiratorial glances and turned his head to the side. He felt he was the punch line of an inside joke sometimes, but wasn’t quite sure why. His curiosity was interrupted by his cell phone vibrating in his pocket. He dug the phone out and read the text message from his mother.

“Yeah! It’s here!” Tommy exclaimed as he pumped his fist in the air excitedly.

His voice roused Carlos from his slumber. “What’s here? Another My Little Pony?” he asked.

“Your birthday was last month, dork. No, my Halloween costume,” Tommy responded matter-of-factly.

Kevin spun his hand around in a circle. “Uh, and...”

“It’s a surprise!” Tommy said with a mischievous grin, staring into Brian’s grey eyes.

Carlos huffed with annoyance. “Dude, if you wear the same costume as me again this year I’m going to kick your ass.”

“You’re still going as the red Master Chief, right?” Tommy asked with sudden concern.

Carlos nodded affirmatively. “You’re going as a Templar, right, Brian?”

Brian responded affirmatively, “I got some chain mail, and Mom bought me a historically accurate tabard and helmet to go with it! Now if I could use Dad’s old sword, the outfit would be perfect.”

“Even with the sword, I’m still going to own you,” Carlos said confidently. He looked over at Kevin. “You decide on an outfit yet?”

Kevin shrugged, breaking eye contact with the others. “I don’t know if my father’s going to let me go.”

“He’s gotta! There’s going to be ten thousand dollars in prizes. This is going to be the best Halloween ever!” Tommy said exuberantly.

“And, you know, nobody does Halloween better than us!” Brian proclaimed proudly.

“Alright...alright. I’ll come up with something, I’m sure,” Kevin assured his friends.

“What about you, Jacob?” Kevin asked.

Jacob smiled. "It's a secret."

"I'll take care of this," Carlos said, poking him mercilessly in the side, causing him to squeal. The bus driver cleared his throat loudly, glaring at the boys through the rear view mirror.

"Quit it!" Jacob protested, his face turning red enough to mask his pale freckles. "I'm going as a vampire," he surrendered begrudgingly.

"God, another sparkly vampire!" Carlos teased.

"No way, dork! A real vampire!" he retorted. Tommy and Brian laughed and applauded.

Tommy leaned back and peered out the window again. The bus sputtered to a stop, letting a few children out. He sang under his breath, "Eight more days to Halloween, Halloween. Eight more days to Halloween, Silver Shamrock." Brian's reflection in the window beamed at him while Carlos and Kevin simultaneously rolled their eyes.

As the bus rounded a bend adjacent to the swamp that surrounded much of the town, Tommy caught a glimpse of a boy wearing filthy blue denim overalls and a wool beret. However, the boy disappeared behind the veil of swirling white smoke left by the bus's exhaust. There was something inherently disquieting about the boy.

The bus ride grew progressively quieter as the bus approached the end of its daily journey. His eyes widened when he saw the same boy from earlier emerging from behind a row of wild hawthorn bushes. This time he made direct eye contact with the mysterious boy. A wicked smile danced across the child's otherwise emotionless face, causing Tommy's body to shudder involuntarily. There was something terrible in the child's visage, forcing him to look away from those hollow, soulless eyes that invaded his consciousness. Tommy looked up to see the bus driver staring intently at

him through the rear view mirror. The rest of the group had fallen into their own little worlds, lulled into virtual slumber by the constant droning of the engine and swaying of the bus. He sank down in his seat, trying to avoid the bus driver's penetrating stare. He glanced over at Brian, who was playing with his phone.

Tommy felt some relief when the final stop was reached and it was time to offload. Carlos, Jacob and Brian were already halfway down the aisle before the bus reached a stop, leaving Kevin and Tommy as the last passengers to disembark. As Tommy descended the stairs, the bus driver reached out and grabbed his hand. "You've seen them, haven't you?" he asked.

A startled Tommy gave the bus driver a bewildered stare as he struggled to withdraw his hand from the man's tight grasp. "Seen who? What are you talking about?" he asked, growing fearful of the man's narrowing eyes.

"The children of the Great Unseen have revealed themselves to you, and now it's your turn to hear *HIS* call," the man whispered in a raspy voice. He tried to back away as the man's eyes darkened, much like the boy he had seen earlier.

"You're hurting me!" an increasingly flustered Tommy stammered, trying to pull away from the man's grip.

Like a passing summer storm, the man's face brightened, and he released Tommy's wrist. "Well, what are you waiting for, boy? It's Friday night. You got the whole weekend ahead of you. Now git!" He smiled warmly at the astounded boy. Tommy stepped off the bus, confronted by Kevin and Brian.

"What the hell happened?" Kevin demanded.

Tommy could do little but shrug his slender shoulders. "I don't know. He was mad about something; it didn't make any sense. Whatever it was, he got over it quickly."

Kevin watched with concern as the bus disappeared down the road, before turning his attention to the dilapidated two-story greyish white house in front of him. “Well, I can’t stall any longer,” he said with a sigh.

“What are you doing guys doing tonight?” Tommy asked.

Kevin shifted his weight. “I think I better stay in and work on homework.”

Brian said, “I promised Mom I’d clean up around the house tonight, but I’ll have the rest of the weekend free after my homework is done.” Tommy looked a little dejected, but at least this afforded him some time to check out his Halloween costume.

“We’ll see you tomorrow morning, right?” Tommy asked Kevin expectantly.

Kevin forced a smile and gave him a playful push. “Yeah, Bro, I’ll see you guys tomorrow. We’ll go into town or something.” Tommy and Brian said their good-byes and the boys parted company for the day.

Tommy’s house was a little larger than Kevin’s, painted a similar weather-beaten white although clearly more care and maintenance has been put into his house than Kevin’s. He bounded through the front door, his eyes scanning the entranceway and hallway for any signs of his package. He poked his head into the kitchen, spying the nondescript brown box sitting on the table between his mother and father.

He made a beeline for the package before his mom intercepted him. “Not even an acknowledgment of us being in the room?” she mockingly admonished him, wiping the curly locks of blonde hair from his face.

“Stop, Mom! Hi, Dad!” he blurted out as he reached for the box.

“So, remind me why you needed to spend six months of your allowance for this?” his father asked while Tommy tore open the package excitedly.

“It’s a surprise for...” Tommy cut himself short. “I mean, I’m just looking forward to Halloween.” The boy delved into the contents of the package, procuring large sheets of fine brown fur wrapped in translucent plastic.

“Is there something you’d like to talk to us about?” his father asked softly, casting a glance at his wife.

“You know, you can talk to us about anything,” Tommy’s mom said soothingly.

Tommy pulled out the lower jaw of the werewolf costume, running his fingers along the jagged teeth as he looked up at his parents with confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, we thought maybe you’d like to talk about someone,” Tommy’s father said.

Tommy thought for a moment, unsure where his parents were going with this line of questioning, though admittedly he felt embarrassed as a sloppy grin crossed his face imagining Brian’s reaction when he sees the costume. Before he could assemble the pieces in his mind, he blurted out Kevin’s name.

“Kevin? What about him?” his mother asked, casting a confused gaze over at her husband on this unexpected subject.

“I think his dad beat him up last night. He was wearing makeup to cover up a black eye, but he didn’t have it yesterday,” Tommy said, looking

out the kitchen window toward Kevin's house. "I'm worried about him," he added.

"That's a serious accusation, Tommy. Has Kevin given you any indication of this?" his father asked, looking troubled.

Tommy shook his head. "No, but he acts afraid to go home. Every day on the bus you can see him start shaking the closer we get."

"That's a worrying sign, Tommy, but we need to know the whole story. Kevin is lucky to have you as a friend. I think the best thing you can do right now is be there for him, and let him know that when he's ready to talk, you'll listen," his father instructed.

"Is there anything else, anything Kevin's said that would make you feel there's trouble with his father?" his mother interjected.

Tommy thought for a moment. "Kevin's mentioned his dad drinks a lot. I think that's when he gets in trouble."

His mother rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Isn't it always?" she whispered to no one in particular. "Your father is right, Tommy. Let know Kevin that you're there for him. There is a counselor at your school trained for this kind of thing, so Kevin has options if he's in trouble."

"Couldn't you talk to his dad, make him stop?" he asked his father.

Tommy's father leaned back in his chair and sighed. "It's not that easy, kiddo. Nobody likes to be told how to raise their child, and I'm afraid if we stick our noses into his business, he might take it out on Kevin. It would be best if the school became involved in this."

Disappointed, Tommy knew this was a problem that couldn't easily be solved. He pulled out the remaining mass of soft brown fur and the upper

jaw of his werewolf costume. “Some assembly required,” he moaned, pulling out a plastic bag full of plastic claws.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to do all the work,” Tommy’s mother warned.

“Uh, no, of course not, Mom!” he replied, his bright, blue pleading eyes belying his underlying intent.

“Well, if you like I can take the measurements and help you get started this weekend,” his mom offered diplomatically.

His face brightened. “Thanks, Mom, that’d be awesome!”

“Alright, go get started on your homework. Dinner will be ready in about an hour,” she concluded, sending the Tommy and his costume out of the kitchen.

His father shook his head and laughed. “I have a feeling this is going to be an unforgettable Halloween.”

Tommy bounded into his room, and spread all the individual components of the werewolf costume across his bed. The macabre mass of soft fur, jaws and claws melded naturally with the horror movie posters hanging on the far wall, above the shelves filled with rows of horror movie DVDs and a couple dozen similarly themed novels. He plopped himself down in his wooden desk chair and rummaged through his backpack for his homework assignments.

CHAPTER 2

Kevin tried sneaking into the house unnoticed, but the combination of the squeaky wooden door and his silhouette accentuated by the sun setting behind him betrayed his presence to his father who was sitting on the couch watching television. The pair made eye contact after Kevin closed the front door. Kevin averted his eyes to the floor, his right eye suddenly throbbing. However, Kevin's father likewise looked down at the floor, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Hi, Dad," Kevin said, his voice wavering ever so slightly with uncertainty.

Kevin's dad forced a smile and calmly said, "Hello," and proceeded to ask about his son's day. Kevin half expected this and smiled, and answered his father's questions honestly and amicably.

"I'm going to order us a pizza, with extra cheese and pepperoni," his father offered, searching for some sign of forgiveness in Kevin's eyes.

Kevin looked up and smiled. "That sounds great, Dad. I'm going to start my homework now if that's all right."

"That's a good boy. I'll call you when it's here," he promised.

Kevin took this opportunity to escape up the rickety stairs and into the darkened solitude of his bedroom. He put his backpack down and sat on the edge of the bed. He composed himself and opened the curtains, allowing sunlight to filter into his room. He glanced around at the myriad of posters lining his walls and sighed listlessly. He stood up and walked over to his dresser, opened up the top drawer and procured a small framed portrait of his mother, father and himself posing together. It was one of the few remaining photographs in the house since his mother left them. His father had destroyed most of the others in a drunken rage the previous winter.

“I’m sorry I let you down, Mom,” Kevin said sadly, as he tucked the picture in the back of the drawer behind his socks and underwear.

He sat down at the desk and stared out the window, seeing that Tommy was rummaging through a box. Tommy spotted Kevin through the window and waved. Kevin counted down from five, after which his cell phone vibrated magically on cue.

“It’s awesome! I can’t wait to show you!” Kevin read off his phone. He peered at Tommy who was proudly dangling something in front of him. All Kevin could ascertain was that it looked brown and furry, which could be anything, but Tommy was pleased at any rate.

“Everything OK?” Tommy texted.

“We’re having make-up pizza. Everything’s cool,” Kevin responded, giving a thumbs-up sign through the window. This prompted a smile from Tommy, who settled back to do his homework while Kevin prepared to do the same.

As the shadows grew longer, he tried focusing on his homework assignment. Shadows shifted progressively with the setting sun until Kevin

melded into the overall darkness of the room. While he read the chapter and took notes, his mind kept drifting aimlessly.

A faint sound of scratching coming from the interior wall caught his attention. He stood up, pressed his ear against the peeling, pale green wallpaper, and listened. At first he assumed it might be mice scurrying inside the wall; it wouldn't be the first time field mice had made their way inside from the surrounding swamplands and fields. However, this sound was softer and at irregular intervals, more like something slithering behind the wall.

He was about to call for his father when the noise abruptly stopped. Kevin opened his bedroom door and peered around. He could hear his father on the phone downstairs, ruling him out as a possibility. He looked into the adjoining empty guest room but saw nothing unusual, so he settled back into his room and resumed his note taking.

After a few moments, Kevin stopped and listened intently. He could hear his father downstairs, but something else caught his attention. It sounded like a distant whispering or chanting of young voices coming from the darkened corners of the room, but he couldn't ascertain the source of the disturbance. The darkness spread across the room like a fog. He looked up in time to witness his dresser mirror fogging up as tiny droplets of water condensed on all the glass surfaces in the room. The air became oppressively heavy and cool, making it a little difficult to breathe. He closed his window, but that offered little relief from the dampness that clung to his skin. He turned on the desk lamp, holding the creeping darkness at bay, but the lights flickered slightly. A framed picture digital reprint of Tommy, Brian, Carlos and Jacob posing with Kevin at last year's county fair fell off the wall, crashing to the floor and cracking. Startled, Kevin jumped up from his chair.

He pushed the red wingback chair that was blocking access to the picture frame aside. The crack in the protective glass ran right through the

group, though at least the picture itself was undamaged. He realized that the wall had been recently stained by water. As he knelt down for a closer look, one of the floorboards raised at the press of his palm. He peered under the loose wooden board and spotted something under the floor. He pried the flooring until it came free, revealing a small treasure trove lurking underneath the cobweb-ridden floor joists.

Kevin pulled out a decrepit brown bag filled with dusty marbles, a deck of playing cards, jacks, an old book of matches, and a tarnished silver pocket watch. He opened the cover of the watch. Its face had been damaged by water, and some of the internal mechanisms were rusted. He squinted at the words engraved on the inner cover: “Happy Birthday, Greg. Love, Daniel.”

The glint of metal caught Kevin’s eye. He reached further in and pulled out an ornate tarnished silver dagger with flakes of a rusty brown substance along its edge that looked like dried blood. The handle of the dagger reminded him of intertwined vines or snakes, forming a jeweled face that stared up at him coldly. There were several yellowed pieces of parchment also stuffed under the floor, but before he could explore them, a distant, guttural voice called out his name. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Naturally assuming it was his father, Kevin dropped the dagger in a panic, quickly pushing all the discoveries back under the floorboard. He returned the floorboard to its proper place, and placed the chair to its original position. He straightened out his shirt and opened his bedroom door, discovering nobody there. He jumped when the doorbell rang. He peered downstairs in time to see his father take custody of two pizzas from the deliveryman. He couldn’t explain it, but for the first time in months, his bedroom was the last place he wanted to be right now. He descended the stairs to have dinner with his father.

CHAPTER 3

Tommy fiddled half-heartedly at his arithmetic homework, trying to find the circumference of a circle. However, his attention drifted toward the costume strewn across his bed, his posters of ravenous aliens or craven serial killers and to the photograph of Brian staring up at him from his desk. He stood up to stretch his legs when the glimpse of movement out the window drew his attention outside. Tommy gasped as he realized the boy he'd seen earlier in the day was standing outside his house, staring lifelessly up at him with a wicked smile that resulted in goose bumps appearing on his smooth arms. He jumped back and stumbled over his chair, falling backward with a loud crash that sent his father dashing up the stairs and through his bedroom door.

“Tommy, what happened? Are you hurt?” he asked, staring down at his son in concern.

Tommy was stunned momentarily. “There’s someone outside staring at me!” he reported, shaken but able to stand on his own.

His father peered through the window, squinting through the twilight, but saw no sign of anyone in the yard. “Why don’t you get yourself cleaned up? I’ll take a quick look around the yard.”

Tommy nodded, proceeding into the bathroom as his dad lumbered down the stairs. As he washed his face, he took a few breaths to try and calm himself. "Someone must be punking me," he said under his breath. He stepped out of the bathroom and turned to flick off the light switch. He caught the glimpse of someone standing right behind. He gasped and spun around in a panic.

"What's going on with you?" his mother asked, looking troubled. "You're as white as a ghost."

"You scared me!" Tommy protested, placing his hand over his racing heart.

"Your father said that you saw someone in our yard?" she asked.

He nodded. "It's some kid I saw on the way home from school. He was dressed kind of weird," he answered.

His mother crossed her arms. "It's probably someone new to the neighborhood, looking for some friends."

"He's wearing old time clothes, like from the nineteen eighties or something," Tommy said.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "If you keep that up, you'll be eating liver for dinner, mister," she teased. "Now turn around so I can make sure you didn't hurt yourself."

He smiled mischievously and turned around. "I'm serious, Mom. I keep seeing this kid. He must have followed the bus here, but he must have booked it!"

“There’s nobody out there now. Dinner will be ready in a couple minutes,” she said, as she left the room.

It wasn’t until she disappeared through the door that Tommy spotted the dirty woolen beret that was sitting on top of his homework, and instantly all the color drained from his face. “Holy shit, no way!” he mumbled to himself, backing out of the room and rushing down the stairs.

“Mom...Dad...Did you guys put anything in my room? Anything at all?” he panted.

“No. I did bring up your laundry this morning. Why?” she asked.

He jumped when the front door opened. Tommy ruled out his father as having been responsible for bringing the cap into his room.

“There’s nobody around the house, though it’s getting pretty dark. What’s gotten into you?” his father asked, looking troubled by his son’s sudden look of panic.

Tommy searched the faces of his parents, hoping to see some sign of a joke. After all, his love of Halloween and his past pranks have provoked some parental retaliation that has succeeded in scaring him. However, those pranks were always simple, like putting a rubber spider under his sheets. His mother put a fake ghost outside his bedroom door, knowing his habit of late night snacking. Therefore, pranks and scares were something of a game for the entire family. However, the pranks were neither this subtle and had never involved outsiders. His body shuddered when he heard a slight creak upstairs.

“Seriously, Thomas, what’s going on?” his mother asked firmly.

He knew she'd never call him by his proper name unless she was getting annoyed or worried. "I'm sorry, Mom, I don't know. Since I saw this kid, I've been getting a weird feeling. It's no big deal. I'm sorry," he said.

"Maybe you should consider losing all that horror crap in your bedroom," his mother said, her eyes narrowing a bit.

Tommy shot her a wounded look. He felt lucky compared with his peers, as most parents wouldn't tolerate his viewing habits. Although his mom didn't like the types of movies and books he preferred, she rarely ever forbade anything. "It's not that, Mom, I swear!" he pleaded a little defensively.

"Alright, go take your place at the table. I'll be serving dinner in a moment," she said comfortingly. Tommy sat down and for the time being he pushed the strange boy out of his head long enough to enjoy the feast of roast beef, potatoes and gravy. The banter about the school football team, classes and gossip around town set his mind back to some semblance of calm. A desert of Dutch apple pie and ice cream soon left him rather full and more than a little sleepy. The family watched television together for an hour before Tommy excused himself back to his room to finish his homework and prepare for tomorrow's adventures.

When Tommy peered around the door, there was no sign of the beret on his desk, and he was certain that neither of his parents had been upstairs since dinner. He sat at his desk and momentarily pondered whether he was starting to lose his mind. Tommy briefly contemplated his mother's concerns, but was certain that his experiences were real. He couldn't identify what was so frightening about the boy, except the hollowness of his eyes. After watching a video on his laptop, he shed his clothing and climbed into bed.

Tommy's eyes snapped open sometime after midnight. His room was bathed in the pale moonlight streaming through his bedroom window. The air was calm and still, with only the sound of his own heart beating reaching his ears. He felt his body floating on that sea of imminent sleep, awake and yet mentally at rest. However, another rhythmic sound filled his ears, reminiscent of a gentle surf washing against rocks on a shoreline. A third rhythmic sound rose above that of the tide, a wheezy, moisture-laden drawing of breath that was not his own, and it called his name.

The sound was deep and guttural in nature, reverberating in Tommy's ears. The sound did not emanate from a particular direction or source. It came from everywhere and yet nowhere simultaneously. There was a long wheeze that blended in with the sound of the tide, and again it called out his name. It simultaneously invoked a strange sense of deep longing, and abject terror. He scrambled from the bed and surveyed the bathroom and the hallway for any sign of intruders. He crept into his parents' bedroom, and verified that both were sound asleep. He reluctantly returned to his room and sat on the edge of his bed for a few moments, and lay down again. "It must have been a dream," he mumbled. He placed his head back on the pillow and turned to face the wall.

"Tommy...Tommy..." a youthful singsong voice called out softly. Only this time, the voice originated from beside the bed. His first response was to draw the covers over his head and deny the creeping dread washing over him.

"Tommy...Tommy...Wake up. It's time to play. *HE* is calling us. *HE* is calling you," the voice said softly.

In an effort to wake himself, Tommy pinched himself hard, to no avail. He remembered the words of the bus driver. "This has to be a prank; they're playing me," he said to himself.

“*HE* shall soon awaken, Tommy. His world shall be ours. Wake up and hear his call, Tommy. Wake up and be with me,” the voice remained soft and boyish and yet there was a menacing cadence to the child’s words.

“Alright, that’s enough. This joke has gone on long enough!” Tommy declared, springing from the bed like a tiger. He made contact with something. He felt smooth, clammy flesh against his hands. He fell forward on top of someone, but by the time his own body struck the floor, there was nothing there. He jumped to his feet and turned on his bedside light but found nothing. There was no sign that anyone had been in his room.

“Tommy, are you all right?” his father called out from down the hall.

“Sorry, Dad, I fell out of bed,” he replied, trying to stop himself from shaking.

Tommy felt like a complete fool now, but he swore he felt something. He turned out the light, sat at the edge of the bed, and stepped in something wet. “What the hell?” he mumbled. He turned his overhead light on and discovered a small puddle of water beside his bed, and a pair of footprints leading to the bathroom that simply stopped. Tommy placed his bare foot beside the footprint. He poked his head into the bathroom, but it was empty. The only thing out of the ordinary was the curiously fogged up bathroom mirror. He stepped out of his room silently and spent the remainder of the night restlessly tossing and turning on the couch until sunrise, at which point he reluctantly returned to his room.

CHAPTER 4

Kevin had a fitful night's sleep, awakening several times to the sound of his name being called, though nothing else out of the ordinary occurred. By the time he awoke, his father had already left the house. This afforded him the opportunity to explore the hidden sundries under his floor. In addition to the items discovered Friday, he pulled out a faded black and white photograph of five boys posing at the county fair. He looked in wonder at the photograph of his own friends hanging from the wall. On the opposite side of the old photograph, someone had written, "September, 1934. Danny, Samuel, Peter, Greg, and me - Plainville Fairgrounds." There was a second photograph of a blonde haired boy wearing a beret and overalls with a silver pocket watch dangling from a belt loop. The other side of the photograph was annotated, "July, 1936 - Greg's 12th Birthday."

Kevin deduced that the pocket watch must have been given to Greg by his older brother Daniel. This led him to conclude that his bedroom once belonged to Gregory, who hid his boyhood treasures under the floor. He didn't understand why Greg had hidden away his pocket watch, as it appeared valuable despite being rusted. He pulled out several pieces of curled, yellowed parchment that had strange, nonsensical symbols and gibberish phrases that meant nothing to him and yet were somehow unsettling. He wondered if the words represented some kind

of code, perhaps a means of communicating privately or a language he didn't recognize.

However, the pentagram sketched on the second piece of paper required no interpretation. While the presence of the pentagram made him feel uneasy, it was the apparent translation of the gibberish words that made his blood run cold. While much of the rust-colored ink was faded and smudged, he was still able to make out some of the words. "The Great Unseen who once trod this earth, call to us, to forfeit our lives to be his servants, to end his eternal slumber so that he may rise and banish death eternally that our worlds may be as one."

Kevin picked up the dagger and ran his finger along its spine, contemplating whether the encrusted ruddy brown substance on the weapon's blade was rust, or blood. He realized that the color of the substance on the dagger matched that of that of the ink on the parchment. He wasn't sure whether the air was growing heavy in the room, but he had trouble breathing. He slipped the black and white photo of the boys at the fairground into his backpack and piled the rest of the items back between the floor joists for safekeeping. When he went to push the red chair back into place, he realized the water stain on the wall had spread, and was now yielding to a strange crystalline black substance. Whatever it was, he hoped it would go away before his father discovered it.

Kevin found Tommy sitting on his back steps, basking in the morning sunshine. "You look like shit, man. What happened?" he asked of his younger companion.

Tommy yawned wearily, forcing his eyes open and nodding up at Kevin. "Gee thanks," he said with a yawn. "I slept like crap last night. I...I had a lot of nightmares," he responded hesitantly, breaking eye contact with his friend.

Kevin sat down beside Tommy. “Yea, it was a strange night. I didn’t sleep good either.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Tommy asked so earnestly that Kevin had to laugh.

“Nothing to do with my dad,” he said, anticipating Tommy’s concern. “It was a weird night. You know that picture of us from last year’s fair?” Kevin asked.

Tommy nodded his head. “Yeah, I remember. Brian lost his lunch on the roller coaster and Jacob accidentally let Melissa Cardwell’s favorite goose loose. It was the best fair ever!”

Kevin laughed. “Well, check this out,” he said, pulling out the old photograph and handing it to him.

Tommy glanced down at the photograph, struggling to focus his weary eyes on the faded image. His eyes locked on to a young blonde that stared back at him. His eyes widened in recognition, and he felt the blood rushing from his head in panic. “Is this is some kind of joke?” he asked.

“No, it’s no joke. What are you freakin’ about?” Kevin replied.

“That’s him!” Tommy asserted.

“That’s who?” Kevin asked his friend, looking confused.

Tommy pointed his finger to the youngest blonde on the right side of the photograph. “I swear to God, that’s the kid I saw yesterday!”

Kevin laughed. “Dude, look at the back. He’d be like seventy years old now. I bet it was one of his grandkids, or you’re seeing ghosts!”

Tommy recounted all the events of the previous day to an increasingly astonished Kevin who saw synchronicity with his experiences the past evening. “If he’s a ghost, wouldn’t he be haunting me instead?” Kevin mused. Tommy could do little more than shrug his shoulders. Kevin had a troubling epiphany, “Wait a minute. Did you say that the bus driver said ‘unseen?’” Tommy nodded his head.

He fell silent for a moment, glancing up at his room, looking back at Tommy, his eyes narrowing slightly. “This isn’t one of your pranks, is it, Bro? I mean, seriously, you’ve not been in my house, right?”

Tommy looked crestfallen at the implied accusation. “I’d never go into your house without your permission, I swear! Not with your father...” his voice trailed off. He didn’t need to go there, but it drove the point home. “I’m not against a Halloween prank, but not on you Kevin,” he admitted.

“Why wouldn’t you want to prank me? Afraid I’d give you a righteous noogie?” Kevin teased.

“No, it’s just that...you’ve got enough real stuff to be scared about,” Tommy said bluntly.

The truth of his words induced a wave of nausea in Kevin. He fell silent as he stared down dejectedly. “That obvious, huh?” he asked softly. He stood up, and for a moment, Tommy feared that Kevin was angry with him. “Come on, squirt, there’s something I need to show you before Dad gets home.” He motioned for Tommy to follow him.

“Kev, can you tell me what happened?” Tommy asked shyly.

Kevin sighed. He’d been holding many things inside and didn’t want to burden Tommy or anyone else with his problems. “Dad got a little lit that

night, and we kind of got into a fight. I said something that I shouldn't, and he let me have it. I knew better. I had it coming," he responded.

"No, screw that, dude! It's not your fault he's a dick!" he asserted as the boys climbed the stairs toward Kevin's bedroom.

"I don't want to talk about it right now, Tommy. You wouldn't understand," he replied a little defensively.

Tommy could sense Kevin was becoming irritated and didn't want to push him. "If you change your mind..." his voice trailed off when Kevin opened his bedroom door." Dude, what's that smell?" Tommy asked, crinkling his nose.

Kevin sniffed the air. "Stinks like the swamp. The wind must have shifted direction," he said, closing his bedroom window. "Check this out, Bro," he said. Upon sliding the chair aside, he discovered that the strange substance on his wall had spread further. Kevin pulled out the floorboard and handed Tommy the old yellowed parchment.

His eyes widened. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed. "This is righteous! How did you find this?" he asked. Kevin recounted his own experiences that night.

"Think these guys were devil worshippers? I've heard some pretty wild stories about this town," Kevin said.

Tommy stared at the pentagram, holding the crinkly, curled piece of parchment at different angles. "Nah, if they were devil worshipers it would be upside down. This is right side up. Druids and stuff use this for magic; I saw it on TV," he said with an air of authority. He looked up at Kevin, then back to the parchment. "This is like what the bus driver said!"

“That’s why I thought you should see it,” Kevin admitted. “I didn’t think you’d believe me unless you saw it for yourself. I think this kid’s name was Greg, and this had to be his room because his stuff is here.” He reached down, pulled out the pocket watch, and handed it to Tommy. “I always thought ghosts haunted where they used to live.”

“Or where they died,” Tommy countered.

“Can a ghost haunt two places?” Kevin asked.

“I didn’t think so. Although, some movies have the ghost follow a person around everywhere,” Tommy suggested.

“Like a curse?” Kevin asked.

The concept of being cursed by some malevolent spirit was a source of great consternation for Tommy. Kevin saw real fear sweep across his friend’s brow. He reached over and wiped the curly locks of blonde hair out of his friend’s face.

“Oh, cut it out. There’s no such thing as ghosts. That crotchety old bus driver was giving you shit, and you had a nightmare about it,” Kevin said soothingly.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Tommy said without conviction. His eyes fixated on the dagger, “Whoa, sweet!” he said, reaching down to pick it up. “Dude, is this blood?” he asked with some sense of wonder that made Kevin giggle.

“It could be,” he said a little provocatively. “It was probably used to sacrifice some virgin,” he teased.

Tommy gulped but smiled. “Well, I’m safe then.”

“Oh my god, you liar!” Kevin declared. He reached out to apply a noogie to Tommy’s head when a car door slammed shut in the driveway. “Shit, Dad’s home!” Kevin said.

Tommy helped him pile everything back under the floor and clean up a bit. Kevin shoved his math book into his hand and grabbed his knapsack. “Play it cool, Bro,” he instructed.

The boys casually walked down the stairs, greeting his father as he came through the front door. “Hi, Mister Williams,” Tommy said to the man politely.

“Good morning, Tommy,” the man said with a polite nod. “Kevin, are you going somewhere?” he asked, looking intently at him, glancing upstairs.

“Tommy is going to help me with my math, then we’re going to walk into town and get some food...if that’s alright, Dad,” Kevin responded hesitantly.

“Sure, but be home by six. I’m going to cook us a ham,” his dad said, pointing at the grocery bag.

Kevin nodded. “Yes, Sir, I’ll be home by six.” There was an awkward pause before his father looked away and disappeared into the kitchen. The concern and subsequent relief on Kevin’s face was palpable.

Tommy looked down at his phone as it vibrated. “Brian is on his way. Carlos said he’ll meet us there with Jacob,” he said.

The boys awaited his arrival on Tommy’s front steps. The wait wasn’t long. “Man, what’s with the weather? We’re never going to have

snowboard season if this keeps up,” Brian stated plaintively. “What’s with you two?”

Tommy and Kevin looked at one another, then back toward Brian. “Nothing,” they responded simultaneously. Both boys stared down at their sneakers, avoiding eye contact with him.

“Oh, bullshit! You both look out of it,” he said, trying to read their expressions.

Kevin sighed and Tommy grumbled under his breath. The two looked at one another again. “Should I tell him or should you?” Tommy asked Kevin. Kevin waved his hand.

“I think I’m being haunted by a cursed ghost boy,” Tommy moaned.

Brian laughed, grinning ear to ear. “Well, duh. It’s almost Halloween.”

Tommy grimaced up at him. “No, I’m dead serious. Kevin, show him the picture.”

While Brian glanced at the old photograph, Tommy proceeded to explain everything that had transpired the past evening.

Brian plopped himself down beside Tommy and stared down at the picture. “You guys are punking me, right?” He searched his face for those telltale dimples that usually betrayed his mischievous intentions, but saw only weariness.

“Let’s get going,” Tommy said flatly. The three boys walked silently down Sutter Lane between the rows of dilapidated houses punctuated with bright orange jack-o’-lanterns, dangling plastic skeletons and ghosts formed out of dingy white bed sheets, hung in effigy on the decks and trees in front of practically every home. Dogs barked in the distance as

the autumn leaves skittered across the cracked sidewalks beneath the boys' feet. Most of the broadleaf trees had already shed their foliage, though some of the oaks and maples were still sporting their autumnal splendor, interspersed with sickly evergreens heading out toward the surrounding swamplands. After about fifteen minutes, Tommy broke the silence by discussing the prospects of food, something that animated the three boys' conversation and pushed out the thoughts of haunting from both Tommy and Kevin's mind for the time being.

Residential wooden houses gradually yielded to more industrial type structures, primarily gritty, grime streaked brick or concrete buildings with cracked windows that reminded Tommy of school. Most of the town's buildings were built in the same decade, so this was not surprising. Many of the light industrial businesses that once graced the town had been shuttered at the end of World War II. Some of these buildings remained abandoned for decades, occasionally finding a tenant for their hollow, neglected shells. The malaise has spread to the main street, with some of the quaint shops and businesses now boarded up with plywood. Despite the sour times, the surviving businesses made the most of the small town charm and threw themselves into the Halloween spirit. Black and orange banners fluttered from some of the doorways, decorations dangling from many of the display windows.

The trio encountered an older man standing on the sidewalk, facing westward with the sun at his back. He remained motionless, scarcely drawing a breath. Only his grey hair swayed independently in the southerly breeze that swept down Main Street. He wasn't focusing on anything in particular. Tommy followed the man's gaze down the street and between the buildings where the heart of the swamp lurked in the distance but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

While he thought the man's behavior was a little odd, Brian and Kevin gave it little thought and turned the corner, narrowly avoiding

a younger man standing at the edge of the hardware store staring in the same direction. A cup of coffee in his left hand was tilted enough to spill its contents onto the sidewalk, forming a small puddle at the man's feet. The man acknowledged neither the spilling coffee nor the boys who nearly collided with him. He kept staring westward lifelessly. His eyes were darkened and narrowed. His head turned ever so slightly, as if listening intently to something in the distance, but Tommy could hear nothing aside from an occasional passing car. Neither Brian nor Kevin noticed the man's behavior, but something about it grated on his nerves.

Carlos and Jacob were already hanging out in front of the small diner, waving at their friends and smiling. The boys exchanged greetings and piled inside, receiving a warm smile from the waitress who was taking someone's order. "Happy weekend, boys. Be with you in a moment," she said pleasantly.

The boys jockeyed for their favorite seats, which usually resulted in several moments of posturing, though the results were always the same. Tommy took the window seat with Brian right beside him while Carlos and Jacob took the opposite side, usually with Jacob at the window. Kevin sat at the head of the table, facing the window.

It didn't take long for Carlos to survey the faces of his friends and surmise something was amiss. "Alright, what's up with you girls?" he demanded.

Brian blurted out, "Tommy saw a ghost!" Tommy, deflated a little, sank further into his seat, choosing to focus his attention on the menu rather than elaborating on Brian's words. Kevin sought sanctuary in the diner's breakfast menu, but Carlos wasn't going to leave this conversation alone. He grabbed both menus from the boys' hands and slammed them on the table.

“Dudes, seriously, we’re going to do this again?” Carlos asked.

“That last time you said there was a ghost in your house, it turned out to be two raccoons getting freaky in your attic,” Jacob quipped with a smirk.

“I never said it was a ghost,” Tommy responded with a pout. He recounted the story he had told Brian, motioning to Kevin to add his side of the story. Carlos and Jacob looked at one another, then over at Brian, and together the three of them laughed. Tommy silently fumed at his friends until the waitress came over to take the boys’ orders.

“Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” the waitress declared.

“Ignore him; he thinks a ghost kept him up all night,” Jacob interceded. Tommy kicked him under the table, causing him to bang his knee on the bottom of the table, rattling everyone’s water glasses.

The waitress cleared her throat politely. “The usual Tommy?” she asked.

He nodded and smiled. “Yes, please.”

After the waitress had taken everyone else’s order, she stopped and addressed the group. “Ghosts are no laughing matter. I’ve never seen one myself, but this town has known a lot of heartache and tragedies,” she said, lowering her voice a little. “My grandma told me a lot of stories about this town, stories most of the locals will deny to your face, but when you look in their eyes, you know they’re lying. When a town has suffered this much, you have to wonder what’s going on beneath the surface. She always told me that you can’t bury the sins of the past because one day those sins will return home. I pray to God that you kids aren’t here to see that day.” She smiled down at the boys, and disappeared into the kitchen.

The four boys stared at one another blankly. Kevin broke the silence. “Well, that just happened.” His words prompted a chorus of giggles.

“What do you think she meant by the sins of the past?” Brian asked.

Jacob became quiet, looking out the window pensively. Carlos discreetly placed a comforting hand on his bare leg. Kevin knew he wasn’t the only one having trouble at home, and looked sympathetically at Jacob. “The bad things people do tend to come back to haunt them,” Kevin said softly.

“I’m sorry, Tommy, I believe you,” Brian said apologetically, leaning into his friend.

Tommy responded, “Kevin’s probably right. The bus driver was messing with me.”

“What’s up with that anyways? Seriously, dude, say something to the counselor at school,” Carlos recommended.

The waitress returned with a large tray of food, which she distributed to each of the boys, with baskets of bacon, hash browns and French fries placed in the center of the table. “Do your parents know you two are drinking coffee?” she asked Brian and Tommy who smiled sheepishly. She glanced down at Kevin to hand him his soda. She raised her eyebrows in concern. She started to say something about the boy’s black eye, but she read the expression on his face and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Let me know if you boys need anything else,” she said sympathetically.

The boys remained silent for the first few moments, heartily tearing into their respective meals and stealing one another’s food when the other wasn’t looking. Carlos broke the silence. “I shouldn’t be giving you shit either, dude. Jacob, tell them what little Mikey Green told you Friday,” he instructed.

Jacob leaned forward against the table. “You know Mike Green, right? His dad died of a heart attack last summer while working on the school. He’s been going around telling everyone that Jimmy Watkins is coming home and promised to take him to a special place where they can be ‘together forever,’” he said, making air quotes. “They’ve dragged him to the shrink twice this month already. I overheard a couple of the teachers talking. Mikey was supposed to go trick-or-treating with Jimmy, but he caught a bad cold and ended up staying home, so Jimmy went out alone,” he added breathlessly.

“Man, poor Mikey. He’s such a nice kid, too,” Kevin said.

“I bet he blames himself for Jimmy running away or...” Brian said.

“He would have ended up in the same shallow grave or sink hole,” Carlos interrupted.

“You don’t know that he’s dead,” Tommy said a little defensively.

“He’s not coming back, Tommy,” Brian said softly.

He looked down at his plate and picked at the remnants of his omelet. “I know. I just wish I got to know him a bit better.”

“Enough of this depressing stuff. So tell us about this damn costume you’ve been raving about for the last week,” Carlos demanded.

Tommy looked over at Brian and beamed excitedly. “I told you, it’s a surprise. But it’s awesome, though when they said some assembly required, they weren’t kidding. It has to be tailored to fit me right, but Mom promised to help me with that. It’s wicked realistic, too!” he said gleefully.

Carlos turned to Kevin. “I’m thinking Tommy didn’t buy this costume for himself.”

Tommy’s face turned scarlet. “I d-don’t know w-what you’re t-t-talking about,” he stuttered.

Everyone else giggled and finished off their food as the waitress returned with drink refills and the bill. The boys dug into their pockets and split the bill, heading off to the arcade for the afternoon. Most of the boys’ individual concerns surrendered to the joy of an afternoon of freedom.