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THIRD EYE

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Lost Hollow Books
Spring Hill, Tennessee

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For the traumatized and the anxious.
You are safe right now.

Information about the tropes and other contents of this story
can be found at the author's website:

www.isaacthorne.com/tabs-terrible-third-eye



Those who dream by day
are cognizant of many things
which escape those
who dream only by night.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Eleonora”

Tis the eye of childhood
that fears a painted devil.

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Rule your mind or it will rule you.

—Horace

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CHAPTER ONE

Someone was shaking him, rattling his teeth inside his skull. Rough, sandpapery hands gripped his shoulders, snagging on the soft cotton of his pajamas. The tugging sensation ripped him, without consent, from the sticky web of sleep. Awareness inevitable, Tab Beard opened his eyes. Senses snapped to attention. The burly silhouette of his father, Tim, loomed over him in the dark. Worry sat heavy on his features, visible even in the low light filtering in from the hall. A bright flash, a crack of thunder, and sleep was relegated to a distant memory.

“Wake up, son.” The older man’s voice resonated with remnants of dreams interrupted. Its texture mirrored the scent of his breath, tinged with the stale odor of Marlboro cigarettes. The taste of it along with a day’s fade of Old Spice burned the back of Tab’s throat. “Come on. Storm’s here. We got to go. You’re too old for me to have to carry you. Come on.”

“Just leave him, Dad!” said a voice from somewhere outside his room. His older brother, Jeremy. The jerk.

In the next instant, he heard his dad grunt. Pressure invaded his armpits as his body launched into the air and snuggled the man’s torso. Tab allowed his chin to rest on his father’s broad shoulder. He wrapped his arms around

his neck on instinct. Cheek stubble tickled his left temple, prompting a giggle despite the urgency of the situation. Nine years *was* too old to be carried, probably. Then again, he was too sleepy to care. And there was something comforting about not having to be in charge of his own body when the urge to remain asleep was this powerful.

Together, father and son bounded down the flight of stairs leading from the second-story bedrooms to the front door. A severe wind slapped the half of his face not pressed against his dad when they dashed outside. He turned away from it, glimpsing his mother, Sandra, running ahead of them as he did.

The gale whipped at her, peeling her nightgown away from her shins as she moved. Alongside, Jeremy ran like the devil was after him. He towed his homemade Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man pillow by one fluffy arm. It had been a birthday gift cut and sewn by his mom before Tab could even remember. At twelve, Jeremy claimed to be too old for toys. Yet the Marshmallow Man remained his buddy. At bedtime, anyway. Tab silently vowed to remember this image and use it the next time Jeremy called him a name. His brother's sleep-styled dark brown hair parted in a comb-over as he ran thanks to the force of the wind.

The four rounded the corner of the house when a brilliant bolt of bluish-white lightning struck the giant old walnut tree. Chopping it down had been on his dad's weekly to-do list for years because of how sick it grew. Somehow, he never seemed to get around to it. If the electricity in the air had its way, he might be too late.

The accompanying clap of thunder arrived a short time after. The explosion startled Jeremy, who bumped into his mom, knocking her off her feet. In his attempt to recover, Tab's brother slipped and fell into the mud himself. Dad stayed upright in spite of Mom bumping him on her way

down but had to stumble backward a few paces to achieve it. Tab braced for impact, but his dad righted himself and set him down.

"Stay here," he said, pressing Tab against the side of the house. He next scurried to his wife and eldest son, helping them regain their footing, making certain there were no injuries.

Another *crack* echoed through the air, followed by a sharp metallic thud. A new odor permeated the environment: burning wood. Tab associated this aroma most with winter months. In this late spring thunderstorm, the scent created an otherworldly sensation, a stark contrast to the events around them. Dad wouldn't need to cut the tree down anymore. Creaking, swaying, and seconds later toppling, the beast crashed on its own. A thick, heavy branch now rested atop the door to the storm cellar.

"Fuck!"

"Tim!" his mom exclaimed. But at his dad. Not him. Everyone called him Tab because that's what his initials spelled: Timothy Aaron Beard, Jr. TAB. At school, he was only "Tim" until new teachers grew accustomed to calling him by his nickname.

Jeremy once tried to grate on him by telling him "Tab" could be short for "Tabitha," a girl's moniker. His brother went by "Jeremy" most of the time, although Tab had spent much of his toddler and up years pronouncing it *Jermy*, skipping the second *e*. Germs were gross things that made people sick. Tab thought *Jermy* could be a good comeback insult. Technically. But it had become too familiar among the family to offend his brother now. He once tried nicknaming the older boy "Jab" on account of his middle name, Alan, also started with the letter A, but that didn't stick.

Rain cascading off his head, Tab's dad swiped at his eyes to clear his vision. "Sorry." He motioned to Jeremy. "Come here. We can slide it far enough to get it off the door."

Tab offered no assistance. There were lots of things around the farm he wanted to help with. Like changing the tractor's tires or swinging the axe the way Dad does when he chops wood. Or stacking the hay bales in the barn loft. "When you're older," Dad would say. This seemed like one of those "when you're older" times.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Turning in that direction, he saw two tiny red dots of light glaring back at him from the darkness. Eyes. Animal eyes. Some animals' eyes glowed in the dark when they lurked on the sides of roads at night. When Dad's headlights struck them right. Cats and opossums and deer all had glowing eyes. He remembered seeing green ones. They used to scare him, but they were only wild creatures camouflaging themselves away from the noise and lights of passing cars. That's what Mom and Dad said.

An icy sliver of panic pierced his heart. *Alfie!* he thought. *Oh no! Alfie!*

Tab surveyed from a safe distance as his parents and brother, still in their nightclothes, wrestled with the unwieldy limb of the walnut tree. The family's orange tabby cat, who Jeremy named Alfie in honor of Batman's butler Alfred, had wandered up to the house a year before as a feral kitten. Tab had not objected to the name because Batman was the only thing he and his brother enjoyed together. Soon after, the cat adopted the Beards as his own. Now he could not be found.

"Alfie! Alfie, where are you?" He swiveled his head in every direction and settled again on the pair of red eyes at the edge of the lawn. They had not moved.

It has to be him, he thought. The red must be a trick of the light. He ran out with us and got scared by the lightning and thunder. He's hiding in the woods. That's all.

“Alfie!” he mimicked the singsong voice his mom used to call the family to dinner every night. “Alfie! *Psh psh psh!* C’mere, boy! C’mon!”

The eyes crouched lower to the ground, the way Alfie did when he prepared to launch attacks on unsuspecting toys that contained jingle bells. Or human toes.

“It *is* him!” Tab leaned forward, adopting his own crouch. The ground water soaked through his pajama pants and dampened his right knee. He bet he’d gotten them muddy, too, but chose not to care. Like Gramma always said, it would all come out in the wash. They couldn’t allow the cat to stay outdoors all night in the storm.

“*Psh psh psh.*” Tab stretched his right hand out and rubbed the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger together as further incentive for the beast to approach. He’d seen the tactic work when his dad and mom used it. He had no idea why. Dumb cat must have thought they had food. Whatever lay in the woods did not buy it.

For one anxious second, he thought he’d scared Alfie away. The twin dots of reflected light disappeared beyond the curtain of rain falling between him and them. Then they were there again, revealed by the branches of a small tree returned to its resting state after a fresh gust of high wind. Alfie had not moved.

Guess I’m gonna have to go get him.

He stole a glance at the rest of the family. They’d shoved the gigantic walnut limb most of the way off the cellar door. Not enough to swing it open. Only his brother’s Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man, propped against the side of the house and near a mud puddle so Jeremy could help move the limb, had eyes on him. He could grab the cat and race back to the cellar before anyone knew. Mud sucked at his bare feet, lapping at them as if the earth wanted to swallow him whole. He hated the sensation. Rescuing the cat would be a welcome distraction.

Inching forward, careful to not frighten Alfie, Tab fought the urgency to pry himself free of the ground so he could secure the cat in his arms. The poor beast stood closer to the ground than him. If the rain and mud were going to drown anyone, it would be Alfie first. Halfway to the edge of the yard, where the tree line began, the eyes disappeared again. Tab stopped dead, terrified the cat had run off. Soon enough, they reappeared, closer to him than before.

He sighed. *Stay still!*

A menacing growl emerged from the maelstrom. Angry. Threatening. Tab's knees gave when its vibrations traveled through his ears and down his spine. The creature in the woods was not Alfie, and was *not* friendly. Before the little boy's brain could command his legs to flee, it was upon him.

Small branches obscuring the thing rustled and moved apart. The creature dashed from the woods on limbs made from springs. It closed more than half the distance to Tab in one ferocious leap. Trails of foaming saliva dripped from bared fangs. Canid lips peeled back to reveal blackened gums stacked with yellow rows of pointed teeth. A pale red tongue lolled from the left side of its mouth. It was as if the organ had died. Black fur hid the rest of the creature, save for the pink inside the bat-like ears at its temples.

The thing reared on its hind legs. In the next second, it transformed into something resembling a man, or a woman, with a mane of hair flowing over its entire body. A ferocious wolf's head capped these features, too big for the frame it sat atop. Triple-knuckled fingers dangled from the ends of extended hands. Crescent-shaped yellow-gray claws adorned each digit. Its human-like shoulders were broad, meaty, and muscular. As it stretched and straightened itself in the beams of the floodlights, Tab glimpsed

pink rippling flesh in its armpits. The creature howled a lonesome, broken note that hung long in the air.

Tab's paralysis broke. He backpedaled, incapable of tearing his gaze away. Matching his backward steps with forward ones, the creature closed in with alarming strides. It towered over him. He froze, his terror-struck mind unable to process the scene. A strand of mucous snapped off the creature's lower lip, oozing onto the boy's upturned forehead. The glob ran down his left temple and lodged there, dammed by Tab's curly blond "rock star hair." His dad's description. Something sizzled in his left ear. A searing sensation accompanied it. Tab clapped his hand to it, trying in vain to massage it away. Two fingers smeared the goop on his temple. It was thick and gross and...burning? The tips of his fingers felt like they were on fire. Without thinking, he stuffed them in his mouth, then immediately pulled them free and spat toward the creature. Now his tongue and the back of his throat felt hot and sore as well.

Thunderheads opened, dropping a fresh deluge of fat raindrops akin to the force from the end of a garden hose when you press your thumb against it. Only, it poured everywhere. The creature in front of Tab yowled in agony and, he would swear, began to melt right before his eyes. Its snout drooped and ran from its skull like candle wax. Its gleaming red eyes went dark and caved into their sockets. Fur molted from its withering shoulders and fell to the ground in great heaping clumps.

By the time his dad's rough hand snatched Tab's left one, the creature had disappeared into the orangey black muck of Tennessee mud and clay. After a few thudding sprints—with Tab struggling both to remain upright and keep up this father's pace over the soft ground—the family huddled inside the storm cellar as the heaviest of the

night's tempest thundered and crackled in the sky. It hammered nonstop at the steel cellar door over their heads.

Tim deposited his son alongside the boy's mother on the cellar floor, then strode back up the stairs long enough to latch the door. He knelt in front of his young namesake after, eyeing him in earnest.

"What have we told you about wandering off?" he asked, his voice firm but not unkind. "We heard you scream and thought something had happened to you."

"I—I didn't scream," Tab said. His voice sounded small and trembling to his own ears.

His dad smirked. "Well, *somebody* screamed. Sounded like someone was sawing your leg off." He glanced at their mother. "Mom here thought there was another man in the storm with us. You howled like a full-grown man."

"I didn't howl," Tab said, stronger this time.

His dad scoffed. "Okay. Whatever. The point is when I tell you stay somewhere, you stay. We're all safe in the storm cellar now, so it's fine. But in the future, I expect you to do what I tell you. Especially in an emergency, and this is an emergency. Got it?"

Tab stared at his feet. "Got it." He thought a moment and added, "Dad? Are there wolves in these woods?"

His father eyed him, confused. "Wolves? More likely to be coyotes. I don't think we need to worry about wolf attacks tonight, though. Any wild dogs are gonna hunker down in their dens, same as you and me."

"Baby Tabitha is afraid of the Big Bad Wolf!" Jeremy said from beside their mother. His almond eyes gleamed with big brother malice. Tab's mom elbowed him sharply in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Mind your business, kiddo," she said.

Jeremy returned to kneading smudges of dirty rainwater off the Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man with his thumbs.

Tab ignored him. He'd wanted to say something about the Marshmallow Man doll but couldn't seem to think of it fast enough. Besides, Gramma always said that ignoring a monster was the best way to make it slink away on its own. It was never easy, though.

"It's just that I saw one. A big one. I thought it was Alfie hiding in the woods. But it walked out and stood up on its back legs. I got some of its spit on me. Then the rain came and melted the wolf away."

Jeremy guffawed. "Oh, wow! Are you sure you're not still asleep and having a nightmare?"

"Quiet!" Tab's mom said.

Tab glared at his brother. "I'm sure. The place he spit on me hurts, too. It stings." He turned his head so his dad could take in his left temple, indicating the spot with his finger. An angry red lump had arisen there. Tab pressed it by accident, wincing at the sting of his own touch.

"It hurts to touch it?" his mom asked.

"Yeah."

His dad scratched his chin and examined the bump but did not poke at it himself. "It's a big old pimple. That's all. The kind we used to grow when we were teenagers. Could be a mosquito bite or something, I guess. 'Tis the season for those things. Does it itch?"

Tab shook his head. "No. It burns and hurts."

"Well, I don't think it's anything we need to worry about tonight. We'll put something on it after the storm passes. I'm sure it's a pimple or a bug bite."

"He's a little young for acne, Tim," the boy's mother said. She sounded exasperated, the way she sometimes did when she'd had a long day and the boys were "getting on her last nerve."

Tim nodded. "I know, Sandra," he said through teeth clamped tight together. Tab recognized that tone and ex-

pression. It set his stomach to knots. Mom had disagreed with him in front of their sons, an aggravation all-too-familiar to the family unit. He didn't say so. Not this time. But he had before. Although Tab thought his mom should be allowed to speak her mind, he was also afraid of the humiliated rage he saw behind his father's eyes whenever she did. He wished his mom wouldn't try to talk to his dad when he was in those moods.

Sandra Beard's hair, which other than its length was a match for Jeremy's, hung limp and wet on her head and hid her eyes from her youngest son. He recognized the shape of her mouth, though. She was either worried or angry. Or both. She and Jeremy looked almost the same when they were angry, and Jeremy was always angry. A woman of slight build, the two of them seated together were like twins more than mother and son.

Tab didn't think he favored either parent. His dad had a round, friendly face and a brawny build. Tab's Gramma and Grampa always said each parent had their own child: Jeremy matched his mom, and the younger boy resembled his dad. Sometimes he saw the resemblance, but not right now. Right now, his dad's anger created pinchy lines along the sides of his nose. His warm blue eyes narrowed to ice-cold slits.

Jeremy had been right, he supposed. Mom and Dad were fighting again. Tab had not wanted to believe his brother because he lied. A lot. Once, he'd scared Tab half to death with nasty tales about their house. He said he'd heard the hauntings by noisy ghosts who banged on walls when everyone but Jeremy was asleep. The same night, Jeremy had knocked on the adjoining wall between their rooms. Tab bolted screaming from the bed, terrifying both his parents. He'd also scared the cat. Poor Alfie found cover between the refrigerator and kitchen cabinets. Hours passed before the fraidy feline dared show himself again.

The cat. Alfie. *Oh, no! Alfie!*

He searched the cellar but saw no sign of the cat. "Alfie!" He startled both his parents. "Where is Alfie?"

Tim placed a hand on his son's shoulder, no doubt intending for it to be comforting. Tab fought the urge to shrink away.

"I'm sure he's okay," Tim said. "We'll only be down here until the storm passes. He'll find a place to hide."

"But he's all by himself! He's all by himself and if a tornado comes, he'll be hurt! We need to go get him!"

Tab rose and padded toward the cellar stairs. His father tucked a finger into his shirt collar as he brushed past and stayed him. His voice deepened. He'd pushed Dad too far, and this would be his last warning. "Son, I told you we can't go back out right now. Alfie's smart. He'll go in the bathroom and hide. That's where people go in these storms if they don't have a cellar like we do."

"But he's *not* smart! He's an orange cat and—"

"Sit. Down," Tim growled at him, pointing a thick, cracked finger at a long wooden bench on which the rest of the family had settled. "Or I'll make you."

He tugged Tab backward, guiding him back to his seat. The boy crumpled. A tear rolled down his left cheek. He shoved his elbows into his knees and sobbed. His dad's reassurances were not. Impatience inundated the older man's voice. How did he know where Alfie hid? For all they knew, the cat had followed them outside unseen. Alfie might have been devoured by a dog like the one Tab encountered. Or maybe he was lurking in the rain, pawing at the door, trying to find his way into the locked cellar. Tab sobbed but shut his mouth when he spied his dad's third-warning glare.

"Let's all just be patient," Tim said, the scowl on his face betraying his own lack of it. "This will all be over before morning."

Tim plucked his iPhone from his back pocket and launched the iTunes app. He scrolled for a moment, then tapped. An old Eagles song, “The Last Resort,” started playing. It was from their *Hotel California* album, Tab recalled. He only knew this because it was one of his father’s favorites. Dad played it endlessly on car trips, short or long. Mom had once pointed out that Dad seemed to play it mostly when he was stressed. Tab enjoyed the song, too, although he couldn’t make heads or tails of the meaning of the lyrics. When he asked, his dad dismissed his questions with something like “it was a different time.”

“I hate that song,” a gruff voice with a gravelly edge announced from the darkness along the opposite wall of the cellar. “Your cat is fine, though. Alfie is hiding under the couch in the living room.”

Tab trained his eyes in the direction from which the voice had come. Leaning against the cinder block sat a mammoth man wearing beige coveralls and a red baseball cap. From beneath the cap’s band, strands of yellow-blond hair hung in short waves. Enormous chapped hands stained with oil or black dirt rested on his knees. His cheeks, chin, and neck sported at least a day’s worth of salty stubble. The shadow of the cap’s visor obscured his eyes. He grinned. It was a broad smirk that flared his nostrils and crinkled most of the musculature of his lower face.

None of the rest of the family appeared to be aware of the new voice in the room.

“Dad?” Tab said, tugging on his father’s sleeve with one hand and pointing at the stranger with the other. “Who is that man?”

CHAPTER TWO

In the next instant, Tab splintered the bonds of unconsciousness to discover himself in his own bed. He did not remember what happened after the man in the cellar told him Alfie was safe. His feet had warmed and felt clean. His skin beneath his pajamas was dry. He could smell the lavender-scented soap his mom bought that one time at Kroger, the stuff no one wanted to use so she had to find uses for it until it was gone. He also had to pee.

Had the night before happened or had he been dreaming? He supposed the latter was possible. It had been only a week since Jeremy had filled his head with stories about a demonic dog infestation in Lost Hollow. The two boys had “camped” on the floor in front of the family’s television set the previous weekend. Tab’s older brother, flashlight on and tucked beneath his chin, had regaled the younger with folktale after folktale, all set in their own little hometown. He’d told a story about the mysterious hitchhiking woman who was really a ghost. She caught rides with young men who were driving in the wee hours and then asked them to drop her off in front of Lost Hollow Cemetery where she promptly disappeared. He’d told a story about the spirit of a headless engineer who wandered the train tracks down by the old depot, apparently looking for the head he’d lost in a freak derailment on a crisp and moonless October night.

But the scariest stories Jeremy told during their sleepless escapade involved the hellhounds of Lost Hollow: enormous doglike creatures with glowing red eyes and black fur that could walk on two legs like a human and run on all fours like a wolf. These creatures, Jeremy said, were responsible for the disappearances of many their hometown's residents over the years, especially bad children. They emerged straight from a hidden portal connecting the town to the bowels of Hell, claiming sinful souls that they'd then drag kicking and screaming into the fiery depths.

His voice deepening, sounding as gravelly as the earth shoveled over a fresh corpse, Jeremy explained that seeing such a hound but not being dragged into Hell presages earthly (and fatal) disaster for the witness. Just like the poor souls who sheltered in their great aunt Kathy's old general store during the hundred-year flood of 1955. One by one they had entered the safety of that building, never to be seen or heard from again.

That explains last night, Tab thought. *It must have been a dream.*

Rain slapped against the glass of his bedroom window, streaking the fog of humidity condensed there. His curtain was half drawn. Based on the halo of gray haze filtering around the edges of the fabric, he figured it must be sunup.

How long can it rain? He sat up, threw back his bed covers, and slid off the edge of the bed. At the foot, Alfie the orange cat yawned, revealing sharp yellow fangs and a curled pink tongue. He stretched his toes, nestling his right cheek into the velvety fur atop his paws. Tab smiled. Alfie turned out to be fine, after all. The strange man in the cellar had been right.

He peeled back the curtain and glanced out the window. *Dad said it would all be over by the morning,* he thought. *But it's still raining hard!*

Then it dawned on him. He didn't remember returning to bed from the cellar the night before. He didn't remember finding Alfie. Nor did he remember cleaning up before pulling on fresh pajamas and climbing back into bed. The last thing he remembered was asking his dad about the man who was in the cellar with them. If he'd received an answer, he had no memory of it.

He checked the first two fingers of his left hand. They were uninjured. No burns. No scrapes or scars. His throat felt a little sore, but that could have been from the cold rain and night air. Not a speck of mud or dirt from the evening's adventure marked his feet. The only thing peeking out from under the hem of his Spider-Man jammies were clean, pinkish toes with neat, trimmed nails. He'd been wearing his Incredible Hulk PJs in the cellar. He was sure. Someone else had clothed him in Spider-Man, and that was creepy. No one had changed his clothes for him since he was little.

He wiggled his toes, almost forgetting he had to pee. His feet fell in fleshy slaps against the bedroom floor as he danced the dance of urgency, trying to not dampen his fresh nightclothes. He dashed out of his room and past the entryway to his parents' bedroom. From within came the faint sound of the television, on already. On most days, they didn't switch it on until after supper. The voice coming from it sounded like one of the Bad News Guys his dad watched every night while Mom tried not to listen.

He made it to the bathroom. After peeing, he stopped to wash his hands. Mom would be able to tell if he didn't. In the mirror, he caught sight of his left temple. A square of folded gauze had been fastened to his head with four pieces of sterile white cloth tape. A strip pasted each edge of the square to his skin. The cloth covered the pimple or bug bite or whatever the bump was

they'd discovered last night. There was no pain when he touched it now, thankfully.

Pinching a layered corner of the tape between two fingers, he peeled away the edge. There, big as life, sat the bump. Except it was not a bump. It was more of an oblong crater, like the pictures of the moon on the wall of his third grade classroom at school. The interior pulsed a deep, angry red. Swirling within the crimson were blotches of bulky, ichorish goop with a scab-like, chitinous texture. But they weren't like any scabs Tab had ever seen. He poked at one with a fingernail, sending fiery pain in a flare through his skull. He winced, seething.

Peeling the bandage farther back, he leaned toward the mirror. The "scab" disappeared into the swirling mess. A long red line broken by spidery branches wended across the center of the wound. It rolled backward, shortened, reeling the thickest part of itself into the wall of surrounding flesh. Dead center, a shiny black dot emerged from its depths. It glistened in the light of the bathroom fixture. Without warning, it moved, rotating like an eye rolling in its socket. When it stabilized, it seemed to focus. An iris narrowed in its center, staring back at him from his own reflection.

Tab screamed.

From elsewhere in the house came the thudding sounds of his mom and dad racing to locate him. They burst into the bathroom without knocking and collapsed to their knees, one on each side. His mother's hands landed on his shoulder, her eyes enlarged, alarmed. His dad looked sleepy. A double-layered set of purple baggage accessorized each of his eyes.

"It's okay," his mom said. "It's okay, hon. It's okay. You're okay."

"What is this?" Tab asked, indicating his bandaged temple. "It looks like a mad eyeball. And it's moving!"

“Shh, shh, shh. Let me look, honey.” She pried the bandage the rest of the way off his temple and chucked it aside. “Go get a fresh one, please.”

Both Tim the younger and the elder understood she intended the command for Dad. He grunted, pressing his hands against his knees to help himself to his feet, and left the room. Sandra selected a clean washcloth from a short stack of them she kept in a basket by the sink. She dampened it, then dabbed it against the open wound.

“You fell asleep in the cellar last night,” she said. Her voice was tender, soothing. “That’s all. You’re not awake yet. Your dad carried you up here after the storm died down. We cleaned you up and put you back in bed.” She smiled, wistful. “You didn’t know, did you?”

“No.”

“We saw the bump on your head had opened up when Dad picked you up. He thinks you must’ve scratched it open in your sleep or something. We need to keep it clean so you don’t get an infection. If it doesn’t get any better, we’ll have a doctor examine it, okay?”

“Why does it move around?” Tab asked. A second lump lodged in his throat. The thought that it might be a twin of the one on his head occurred to him. He flitted it away, not wanting to follow it to the nightmare conclusion that his entire body might transform overnight into a bag of eyeballs. It was getting hard to stand still while his mother worked. “I thought it was looking at me!”

His mom scoffed. “Well, sometimes, when we’re young, things look scarier than they are,” she said. “That’s more true when something is new or strange. Here.” She produced a hand mirror from a drawer under the sink. “Watch in the big mirror while I hold this up to the bump.” She combed his blond curls away from his temple with one hand and held up the mirror with

the other. "See, honey? Just a bump that's been scratched open. That's all."

She was right. Now that he was able to glimpse the wound without turning his head and cutting his eyes, he saw no black swirls or shining pupil-like dots careening through the redness within. What's more, the redness was now not so red to him. It was pink. Tab breathed a relieved sigh as his dad rejoined them.

"Got some fresh gauze and tape," he said. "Also grabbed the Neosporin while I was at it. Figured it couldn't hurt."

"Thanks." She accepted the bandage and tube of triple antibiotic from him without looking. "Tab, we all had a bad scare last night with the storm and everything. It's natural to be a little nervous and hypervigilant after something like this."

"What's hypervigilant?"

Sandra smiled. There was sweetness in it. "Hypervigilant means being more on the lookout for problems than you need to be."

"Oh."

"Being hypervigilant can make us think we have problems that don't exist. You can double that if you're tired. With young folks like you, the imagination runs amok sometimes. You've only experienced the world through your home life, your school, and I guess a little from TV and the internet. So the problems you're hypervigilant about are still fantastic and monstrous."

"Whend' you get a psych degree?" Tim asked, chuckling. The grogginess had departed from his voice. Sandra ignored him.

"I've read a lot about psychology, Tab. You're gifted with a vivid imagination. It's evident in your drawings. I noticed Dad didn't bring your sketchbook to the cellar with us last night, by the way. He probably should have. Would have been a good way to keep your head occupied."

Tim sighed and performed an exaggerated shrug. "Sorry. Jesus."

"If things aren't better tomorrow, we'll go to a doctor, okay?"

"We can't go today?"

"It's Sunday," Tim said. "Doc's not open. Plus, a lot of the roads are flooded. The news is calling this a 1,000-year flood." He chuckled. "One of those temporary metal school buildings went floating down I-24 up in Nashville this morning! We'll be lucky if we can go buy groceries this weekend."

"Tim!"

Tab's eyes had grown wide, alarmed. Sandra cut her eyes to Tim and nodded in the boy's direction.

"Oh," Tim said. "Sorry. We'll be fine, Tab. It's just bad weather. It'll pass soon. We're not going to run out of food."

From elsewhere in the house there was a loud moan followed by a series of staccato farts and an irritable snort. Soon after, Tab's brother Jeremy settled into a snoring rhythm. The trio in the bathroom looked at each other and grinned.

"He's your son," Tim said, laughing.

"No, he only favors me. When it comes to his digestive system and sinuses, he's you made over."

Tab stopped mid-giggle and peered at his mother in earnest. "Do *I* have digestive and sinus issues, Mom?"

"No, son, but you're going to have sleep deprivation issues if you don't get back to bed."

"But the sun's out!"

"Yes, and most of the time I'd say it's way past the hour both of you were out of bed. But we had a long night. The weather guy thinks we might be in for another one tonight. The more rested you two are, the better. Don't you agree, Dad?"

She considered Tim for the first time since he'd returned to the bathroom.

“Sure,” he said. “I think we could all use as much extra rest as we can get. We’ll feel better when this has all blown over.”

With a fresh coat of antibiotic ointment and a new bandage applied, Tab did as he was told. His bare feet had grown ice cold again from being out from under the covers too long. They welcomed the return of bed warmth with a funny tingling sensation once he slid in and settled down. Tab grinned, allowing his eyes to close. *The human body is weird*, he thought.

“Yours is weirder than you imagine,” came a reply.

Tab’s eyelids fluttered open again. He sat up. The voice was coarse, masculine. The same voice from the night before in the cellar: *Your cat is fine*. Tab glanced around his bedroom. No one sat in the little rocking chair in the back corner beside the bed. No one stood or sat near his chest of drawers, nor at the desk where he spent hours at a time drawing. No one stood in the bedroom’s open doorway.

It took a moment for him to summon the courage, but he bent down from the bed, raised its skirt, and glanced underneath. No one. A shape in the gray light of the morning through the skirt somewhat resembled a rat or a mouse. After some focus, Tab realized it was a bunny. One of the dust variety.

He clambered topside. The folding doors of his closet caught his eye. The closet was lengthy but not deep. It lay behind a pair of bifold doors, each disguising its contents with slats his mom called louvers. He used to rely on the closet often back when he and Jeremy played hide-and-seek, when Jeremy was still fun. It was a great spot. Tab could cover himself with fallen clothes but also see through the spaces between the louvers. He always knew when it was safe to leap from his hiding spot and run for base.

If the man he’d seen in the cellar last night was in his room, he might also choose a great spot like the closet in which to

conceal himself. As if in answer to these thoughts, one of the bifold doors cracked open at its hinge. It made the tiniest of noises, the sound of the roller along its track as the hinges spread apart. The gap where the sets of doors met grew wider, menacing, like a mouth intent on swallowing him whole.

Tab leaned back against his headboard, drawing his covers to his chin, over his mouth, over his nose. His unblinking eyes stung, but he could not avert his gaze. He tried to call for his mom and his dad. The sounds emerged as only squeaking non-words, as if there was no breath left in his lungs to force them over his lips.

The door widened to its limit. The ambient light of the room fell direct on the man from the cellar the night before, who now sat on the floor of Tab's closet. His beige coveralls were unmarred by the previous night's events. No dirt. No dried mud. No dampness. His red baseball cap was likewise clean and dry. He stroked the stubble on his chin and grinned at Tab. A distinct absence of warmth and familiarity contaminated the gesture.

Tab's heart pounded in his chest, filling his ears with pulsing bass. His head throbbed with the rhythm. The wound on his left temple itched and burned under its new bandage and against the rapid flow of hot blood. He resisted the urge to tear the gauze away and scratch it.

"There it is," the man said aloud to him. "Your weird thing. That new third eye you have is gonna come in real handy for you, Timbo. For *us*."

"My name is Tab. Everyone calls me that." The words were out before he could stop them.

"Heh. Yeah. You'll see, Tab. Been following you since you got slapped with the demon spit. You're gonna be a huge help to me. You got three eyes now. Me? I got none."

The man shoved the bill of his cap backward, allowing light to fall on the parts of his face hidden in shadow. Be-

low his prominent forehead ridge were two deep, black eye sockets. No eyeballs occupied them. The lids were there, but ragged and split. It was as if someone had stuck a finger in his sockets and plucked out the eyeballs, mangling the thin membrane of eyelid skin in the process.

“Boo!” he said, flailing jazz hands beside his face. He followed the performance with an endless, thunderous roar of insane laughter.

Tab yanked his bed covers the rest of the way over his head. There, he found the breath to scream again.

CHAPTER THREE

Tab did not go to the doctor on Monday. Nor were Tim and Sandra able to take him on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday of the week following the flood. Roads remained impassable. Schools, which had been only two weeks from dismissal, had not yet reopened. Businesses remained shuttered while merchants clashed with insurance companies and volunteers cleaned up. Small business owners dedicated days and nights to pushing broomfuls of brown sludge water from their buildings. They disposed of ruined stock, mitigated mold, and evaluated salvageable items, all in the service of rebuilding and moving on.

Sandra changed Tab's bandage each morning. She never mentioned the bump, but Tab knew it wasn't healing. To make matters worse, the soreness in his throat had become unbearable to the point that he fought swallowing. When he did, it felt like someone had mashed crushed glass into his tonsils and uvula. The concern on his mother's face while she worked was unmistakable. Her forehead wrinkled and eyes drooped at the edges. Her lips stretched into a grimace. Tab sometimes peeked at the wound but saw no more evidence of the blackened swirls or the pupil he thought he'd seen on Sunday. It wasn't healing, but at least it hadn't worsened. He considered that a win.

At his mom's behest on the worst day of his throat pain, Tab opened his mouth baby bird-style so she could exam-

ine his throat. “Oh no,” she said. “I can see white streaks on your tonsils, kiddo. I’ll bet you have strep again.”

Again. So close to the end of the school year, too. Was it his third or fourth bout with the infection since he started third grade? He couldn’t remember. Tab closed his mouth and sneered at his own reflection. Why did this keep happening? He didn’t use the school’s water fountains. He washed his hands after using the bathroom. Usually. For him to keep getting strep while the other kids remained free of it seemed unfair.

Lucky for him, their pediatrician, Dr. Patel, knew about his strep proclivity. All it took was a phone call from his mom for her to call in a scrip for amoxicillin to a pharmacy that was within easy reach. His dad picked it up, careful to avoid any flood zones, and Tab’s throat began to feel better that same day.

Too bad the bump isn’t strep, he thought.

Each night during Tab’s recovery, his dad searched his son’s room for evidence of the man living in his closet. The man who wore “tan work clothes,” had no eyes, and spoke to him from the depths of the closet regardless of their efforts to stop him. Frustrated after three nights of nothing, Tim bent a wire hanger tightly around the door to prevent it from opening on its own.

“My guess is it’s not hung square,” he told his son. “The house gets cooler at night and things contract. Enough for gravity to pull the door open.” When Tab protested, pointing out his father’s theory didn’t explain the presence of the man, he was met with dismissive silence.

The hanger wire didn’t work, so on the fifth day, Tim tried removing the bifold from its track. He reinstalled it with spare hardware he’d discovered in the cellar. That didn’t solve anything, either. He finally suggested Jeremy might be playing pranks on his younger brother. Or, in an

angrier moment, that Tab was causing his own problems to get attention. On night six, he screamed at the boy to “man up” and go to bed. Tab spent the rest of that night in suffocating silence, afraid both of the man in his closet and his father. Tim’s outbursts could be explosive, a pressure cooker full of shrapnel shredding anyone in his path.

“You read them psychology books,” he overheard his father say to his mother on the morning after he’d reinstalled the door. “Don’t kids do this kind of acting out when they know their parents are fighting?”

Tab didn’t wait for his mother’s answer. He dashed to Jeremy’s room, sensing no safety in his own, even in the daytime. He threw himself face-first onto the empty bed. The covers were taut and clean smelling. Not at all like his brother. Jeremy had of late disappeared into the internet. That, and a series of old horror comedy DVDs their father had collected. He kept falling asleep on the couch instead of going to bed. Tab envied him. He buried his face in his brother’s pillow, thrusting his fists into the soft mattress.

“I’m going crazy,” he mumbled. “I’m going crazy. No one believes me and I’m going crazy.” He lay like that for a few minutes before anyone discovered him. When the light touch of another’s hand settled between his shoulder blades, his breath caught in his throat. He rolled with a start.

“Hon,” his mom said. “I’m sorry you overheard. You’re frustrated. Your father and I are...struggling, too. Listen, you’re a sensitive, imaginative boy. There’s nothing wrong with that. But sometimes sensitive boys, especially the creative ones, take a little longer to grow out of phases than other kids. That’s what I think you’re going through: just a scary, scary phase.”

“Jesus, Sandra,” Tim interrupted. “He’s nearly a preteen at this point and still all over the goddamn map developmentally, at least according to his teachers. He’s small

for his age, but that doesn't mean he's a mental baby. You still talk to him that way, though, don't you?" He gestured open-palmed at Tab. "Third grader reads at a fifth grade level, draws like he's some kind of fucking Mozart, but is still afraid of monsters and needs his mom to comfort him like a preschooler." This last he said in a mocking childlike voice that Tab knew was directed at him, not his mother.

"He can hear you, Tim," Sandra said, although her eyes remained locked on her son's. "And Mozart was a composer, not an artist." To Tab, "Hon, if you're convinced that you're not pretending or imagining things when you see the man in your closet, we're going to need some help to figure out what's going on. What if your dad sleeps on the floor of your room tonight?"

"What?"

"Tim! Shh!" Sandra hissed. "Would it help you feel better? If anything happens, you can wake your dad up when it does. He'll figure out what's going on. Then we can all work together to fix it."

"Sandra, my back—"

"Tim!" she snapped.

His dad sighed. "Okay. Okay. Let me go see if I can find those air mattresses we bought for camping and never used because you were too scared of bugs and the dark to go. We live on a farm, for Chrissakes, Sandra. How can you be afraid of bugs?" The question escaped his lips with a growl, the intensity behind it palpable. It wasn't meant to be answered. His mother would poke the tiger anyway.

"You wanted to go camping for a whole week!" Sandra shot back. "All I said was I don't think I could last that long without some light and a proper bed. I would've been happy to do a weekend."

"Oh, please," Tim sneered. "I offered to start with a weekend and do a long trip later, but you said you were too busy."

"I never said—"

"STOP FIGHTING!" Tab rolled onto his back, facing them. His cheeks glowed a bright red. Tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, one of them washing over the bump on his temple. "WHY CAN'T YOU BOTH STOP FIGHTING?" A tickle irritated his throat. The words broke off with a violent coughing fit, forcing him to sit up. Sandra embraced him, pulling him snug.

"Sorry," she said. "We're sorry, honey. You're right. We shouldn't fight in front of you."

He wiped his mouth and nose with his pajama sleeve, smearing a blend of tears and snot there. "You shouldn't be doing it at all!"

"Sometimes moms and dads fight, Tab," Tim said. "It's okay. It's all going to be okay. We promise. Right, Mom?"

There was a noticeable pause before she answered, but she did answer. "Right."

"I'm going to go find the mattress," Tim said. His back to them, he punctuated his exit with a scoff and a sad, slow shake of his head. Sandra and Tab watched him go. Once the echoes of his footsteps had faded away, Sandra again attended to Tab. She bore a doleful expression, her eyes downcast.

"Look, whatever problems your dad and I are having right now are not because of you or your brother, okay? I promise. Grownups—well, grownups are selfish and silly about some things. That can make it hard to get along for a while. Your dad's a hard-head and has a temper, but I can handle him. We're doing our best to work things out. You know?"

She smiled. "If our problems are causing you problems, you put us out of your mind right now. We're not going to let anything happen to you or your brother."

Tab returned her smile.

"Okay?" she said.

"Okay."

“Awesome. Now, let’s bail on your brother’s room before he finds out we’re in here. He’s at that age now. He doesn’t like other people poking around in his things.”

“I wasn’t poking.”

“That won’t stop him from thinking it. Come on.” She grasped his hand and helped him slide off the bed. “Your dad might need your help setting up the air mattress. I need to find some sheets and a pillow for it, I guess.”

“Dad doesn’t believe me at all,” Tab said.

“Well, Dad’s one of those people who has to see things for himself,” Sandra said. “Some people just need to see.”

“Even if I already know what I saw?”

“Yes, even if you’re sure about what you saw.” She rubbed her forehead with three fingers of her left hand. “Please, Tab. I have things I have got to do. Can you go help your dad? Let’s put this on the back burner until bedtime.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Told ya they were fighting again,” Jeremy taunted when Tab strolled into the family room. He’d evidently overheard the snappishness between their parents while Tab was seeking refuge in his room. The older boy sat in front of the family’s iMac, surfing the web as fast as their satellite service would allow. Which wasn’t fast at all compared to the cable service their school had somehow been able to obtain. Jeremy had a bad habit of using up all the month’s high-speed data allowance in the first week of the new billing cycle, dragging the rest of the month to a nearly unusable crawl because their father refused to buy more data or a higher tier.

“They’re always fighting,” Tab said, a hitch in his voice left over from his earlier fit.

“Yeah. They’re probably gonna get divorced. I’m guessing I’ll go with Dad and you’ll have to stay with Mom. Maybe even Gramma and Grandpa when everything goes tits up.”

Tab clapped his hands to his ears. “Don’t say things like that!”

Jeremy shrugged, not looking away from the Wikipedia article he was perusing. “Listen, I’m just being honest. I don’t think Mom loves him anymore. She spends all her time on

Facebook now and Dad barely knows how to turn a computer on. She's probably having an online affair or something."

"STOP IT!" Tab cried.

From elsewhere in the house came an irritable bellow. "JEREMY ALAN, LEAVE YOUR BROTHER ALONE!" He'd managed to piss off Dad again. That was his warning shot. If Tab cried out a second time, they'd both hear the elephantine stomp of Tim Beard's boots toward the family room. That would most likely be followed by a ten-minute session of screaming. Not at Jeremy specifically, but at both boys in general. And not because Jeremy had been mean to Tab, but because Tab's outcry had interrupted whatever their dad happened to be doing at that moment.

No apology nor acknowledgement escaped the older brother. Only silence. His eyes remained glued to the Wikipedia article on the iMac's screen. They neither spoke nor looked at each other, but Tab understood exactly what Jeremy was thinking and feeling at that moment. He had accidentally poked the tiger in their father again. And for all his bravado, poking the tiger was never an intentional act. So, instead of getting upset, apologizing, or crying, Jeremy simply shut down, becoming invisible until the storm passed.

From over Jeremy's shoulder, Tab recognized the featured image in the Wikipedia article. It was the title screen for *Ghost Adventures*. "Dammit!" Jeremy stage-whispered, presumably so his mother and father wouldn't hear. "They moved the new season premiere to September." He slapped the palm of his hand down hard on the iMac's keyboard, accidentally causing the page to scroll to the "Cast and Crew" section of the article. He spun the swivel chair around to face Tab, his face still red from their dad's chiding. "What do you want, twerp?"

The younger boy ignored the slight. "You're into ghost stuff," he said. "You told me some stories about demon dogs. I want to know if you were making it up."

"Nope."

Tab waited, expecting more, but Jeremy only stared back at him, seemingly annoyed although there was something else there as well. A hint of a smile? A gleam in his gaze? It was like he wanted to share some secret that only he knew. "So you think there really are demon dogs in the woods who drag people to Hell?"

"Doesn't matter what I think. It matters what the evidence says. Right now, we only have stuff people said they saw, but there's enough of it that you can't ignore it or chalk it up to mass delusion."

"What's *delusion*?"

Jeremy sighed, exasperated. "I'm not a dictionary. It means believing that something is real when it's not. Like Santa Claus. Santa Claus is a mass delusion parents force on their kids."

This again. Tab had not quite forgiven Jeremy for spilling the beans on the man in red last Christmas. Now it was his turn to sigh. "Can't you just give me a straight answer for once? I keep seeing a man in my closet at night. He doesn't have any eyes. I want to know if it has anything to do with the demon dogs you told me about when we were playing campout." He paused, then added, "Or am I having a *delusion*?"

"I wasn't *playing*. And I'm not your encyclopedia, either. Look, I've never heard any stories about eyeless men in closets. It's probably your imagination. Maybe Mom and Dad let you sleep with them too long when you were little or something. Don't be such a pussy, *Tabitha*. You're too old to think there are monsters in your closet."

"I'm three years younger than you."

“Yeah, well, that’s still too old. Preschoolers think there are monsters in their closet, dude. But you’re all ‘Oh, no! Mom! Dad! There’s a monster in my closet!’ Grow up.”

“But *you* believe in ghosts!” Tab countered. “And why do you have to be so mean?” When he’d first walked into the room, Tab was debating whether to tell his brother the full details about the dog or wolf he thought he’d seen before the family had locked themselves in the cellar to wait out the storm. Now he was relieved that he hadn’t followed through on that plan. It would’ve only made Jeremy’s teasing worse.

“I believe in collecting evidence.” Jeremy spun his chair so that his back was to his brother again. “Why do *you* have to be so annoying and dumb? Look, you’re too old to be worried about stuff like that. I don’t care what Mom says about your *sensitivity* or your *imagination*. It’s time for you to start acting like a man. Like me and Dad.”

Tab noted some chocolate smeared on the iMac’s mouse when Jeremy grabbed it. An empty Snickers wrapper lay to the right of the device. He considered pointing it out, but decided it might be better to keep the parting shot to himself: *You sleep with the Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man and you think I’m the one acting like a little kid?*

Bedtime arrived too soon for Tab, who now dreaded it every night. It arrived too soon for his dad, too. Tim made no secret of his resentment at being forced from the comfort of his normal bed for the night.

“Just pretend it’s camping!” his mom said, mocking the grown man, before she kissed Tab goodnight. She’d reserved no such well wishes or warmth for Dad.

This was scarier than camping, as far as Tab was concerned. His room was supposed to be a safe place. With the closet on one side and his father grunting, snoring, and

farting on the other, he longed to abandon his room for the safety of the sofa. The glow of a warm television set might help him relax. Mom would not approve. And without Tab to wake him, Dad might miss seeing the eyeless stranger who lives in the closet.

Following an hour of wakefulness, Tab's eyelids began to weigh on him. He closed them, prepared to slip into the fuzz of dreamlessness that begins every slumber. Before his lashes fell, he heard it: the familiar but terrifying sound of the roller gliding along the closet door's track. Tab remained still. He opened his eyes and held his breath. As on the previous few nights, the closet door at first swung open to what appeared to be empty darkness. Tab identified only a row of his school clothes hanging neatly from the wooden rod that spanned the width of the closet.

The figure didn't materialize so much as he was just *there*, the personification of an epiphany. Tab was reminded of Magic Eye hidden picture puzzles. His drawings worked the same way. You had to look at the paper a certain way before the image revealed itself. Then *blam!* he'd created something by adding graphite to a field of blankness. Creating art was Tab's talent. Mom, Dad, and all his teachers said so. Un-creating it was not something he understood. And now that Tab spied the man in the closet, he couldn't *unsee* him.

"Dad?" Tab squeaked. It came out almost too small for his own ears. He steeled himself and tried again. "Dad? He's here."

On the floor, Tim grumbled something. It might have been "go back to sleep," but sounded more like a mumbling concoction of syllables strung together without spaces.

"DAD!"

That kickstarted everything. His father sat up and barely missed slicing open his own left temple on the corner of

Tab's nightstand. "Whu—?" he groaned. "What's wrong? What's going on?" He crawled to his knees, using the edge of Tab's mattress for support. His back popped, prompting a moan and a wince of pain.

Down the hall, a light in the master bedroom flickered on. It cast a polygon of brightness onto the dingy beige carpet mapping the way to every room on this level.

"Dad! Mom! He's here!"

Tab's father rubbed his swollen eyes and peered blearily at the space to which Tab pointed. Still tying her bathrobe, his mother arrived in his doorway and likewise followed his gaze. Tab glanced from one adult to the other, his disappointment evident.

"There!" he said. Then, weakly, "Don't you see him?"

They did not. His mother squinted into the darkness of his closet, using her left hand to block the light from the hall. His father wore an expression identical to hers. Neither of them could distinguish the ghastly visage who sat in the bottom of his closet. As if to underscore this fact, his father crawled to the enclosure on his hands and knees. He threw open the remaining bifold door and passed his hand through the open closet space under Tab's dangling clothes.

"Hee hee," said the man with no eyes. It was laughter without mirth. "That tickles."

"You—you don't see him?" Tab's gaze darted from his father to his mother and back again.

Tim shook his head, irritable. "No, son. Ain't nothing here."

"Please," said the man in the closet. "You know I'm here, kid." He jerked a thumb at Tim. "This guy can't see me because he's an idiot. Hell, he don't even know his wife's a cheat. Look at him. Trying to touch me. Clueless."

Tab pulled his covers over his head. "Shut up!"

"Tab!" his mom said.

"He's talking to me, Mom! He won't stop!"

“Jesus Christ.” That was Tab’s dad, the tiger lurking just under the hoarseness of his awakened-from-sleep voice. “Nobody’s here but us. Go to sleep. You’re too old to believe in monsters.”

“I’m no monster,” the man said. “I’m here to help you, Tab. Your dad’s something else, ain’t he? Taking out all his weakness on you and your big brother.”

Tab peeked out from under his covers. His father was leading his mother out of his room. The man had emerged from the closet and was closing in on the left side of the bed.

“You know what you should do, son?” the ghost said, adopting a conspiratorial whisper as he leaned in close to Tab’s ear. The boy shivered, whimpering involuntarily as the thing drew closer. “You should kill him.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Sandra made two appointments for Tab the next morning. The first was with his pediatrician. The second, with a counselor who also authored Sandra's latest read, *Anxiety, Depression, and Your Child*. The back cover of the book showcased a striking photograph of a smiling man with a brown complexion. He was thin and bald with attention-grabbing cheeks and dimples. A pair of square glasses sat on the bridge of his nose. Their Zyl frames swirled with every color of the rainbow. The bio beneath the picture informed her that Clark Clifford, PhD, "lives and works in Hollow River, Tennessee."

Hollow River was the same town in which Tab's pediatrician worked. Sandra loathed driving so far for medical care, but she didn't trust Lost Hollow's pediatric center. It was a double-wide trailer consisting of two pasty, angry-sounding men with hair sprouting from their ear canals. To Sandra, they looked like bipedal Persian cats with nasty tempers. Dr. Susan Patel, on the other hand, was no more than forty years old. She was patient, had a kind face, smiling brown eyes, and a compassionate demeanor. All must-haves for those Beard boys.

Tim hated doctors. He had spent the entire morning on the family's landline arguing with a developer who had asked about buying his great-aunt's old farm. The plan was to develop the massive acreage into a live, work, shop de-

velopment. With luck, it would bring money and infrastructure to their backward little hometown. “We might subscribe to cable TV and internet instead of this shitty, expensive satellite crap,” Tim had surmised one evening after a couple of beers.

The flood from the previous weekend might have ruined that plan. A large area of the acreage was surrounded by Hollow Creek. And Hollow Creek had flooded the night of May 1, much like the old-timers said it had way back in 1955 when Aunt Kathy and a number of other folks got washed away, never to be seen again.

So the stories went. Some rumors were circulating that one of those people had turned up in Lost Hollow the day before the latest flood. Tim said he’d seen a doddering old stranger with some memory problems wandering the decrepit general store on Aunt Kathy’s old property. “Coulda hurt himself,” he’d said. “I took him home. It was weird, though. He didn’t seem to know his own last name.”

The flood made travel into Hollow River treacherous while creeks and rivers ran high. The day before his phone call, those levels dropped. At least according to Tim. Not that he knew much about waterways. Or anything, except how to drive a tractor and thud heavy bass in his titanic Dodge Ram. While Tim played farmer and real estate mogul, Sandra cared for the kids and made ends meet. She was grateful farmers in Lost Hollow had little interest in handling their own accounting.

Except for today. Today she took yet more time off work to uncover why her youngest kid had a marble lodged in his temple and was seeing eyeless ghosts. Were the problems related? If Dr. Patel believed they were, Sandra might cancel Tab’s appointment with Dr. Clifford. She had hesitated to schedule it for that reason, although she longed

to meet the man to whom she had devoted her bedtime reading of late. This might be her only opportunity.

She considered carrying one of Dr. Clifford's other books, *Soothing the OCD Beast*, with her so she could ask for his autograph. Of all the volumes, it was the one in the best shape. She'd plucked it from its place on the study bookshelf, but replaced it, thinking that asking him to sign it might make her too fan-girly. This appointment was for Tab, not her.

By the time the trio of Beards arrived at Dr. Patel's, Jeremy was already obnoxious and bored. In typical fashion, he took it out on Tab. Both boys sat in the back seat of Sandra's pearl-colored Honda Accord. By state law, Jeremy long ago qualified to ride up front but chose not to for reasons known only to him. In the last fifteen minutes of the trip, Tab grew weary of Jeremy's handsiness. The elder jammed a finger into the younger's shoulder, causing him to squeal "STOP TOUCHING ME!" Startled, Sandra nearly slammed the Accord into the back of a Wal-Mart semi.

In the doc's parking lot, she paused to center herself, then admonished both boys. "Tab, you stay with me the whole time, okay? Don't wander off to the play area." She lowered her voice an octave. "Jeremy. Stay in the waiting room and occupy yourself while we're in with the doctor."

"But I'm boooooored," Jeremy whined.

"Take your iPod Touch with you and play a game or something. Sheesh."

"Y'all won't let me get any *good* games." He pushed his lower lip out in a mock pout. Sandra hated it when he did that. Everyone, including Jeremy, knew that he was far too old to throw tantrums. His toddler-like reactions were just attempts to needle his folks. He couldn't poke them physically like he could Tab, so he schemed psychological ways to frustrate them instead.

Sandra seethed. “Please do what I say and stop acting like a child.”

“Why do *I* have to stay in the waiting room with all the sickies?”

“God, son, do what I ask. Okay?”

The truth was Sandra didn’t trust Jeremy to keep his brother’s diagnosis quiet. Tab already had trouble getting along with the other kids. Jeremy’s big mouth would be no help there, in particular if the man in the closet was a hallucination. Tab lived in his own head most of the time. His teachers confirmed that, telling Sandra they often caught him drawing, daydreaming, or staring out the window instead of sitting at attention or doing his class assignments.

“Fine, then. Let’s go,” Jeremy said.

The older Beard brother didn’t speak to either Sandra or Tab for the rest of the walk to the waiting room. Nor did he acknowledge them after they pushed through the door. He found a row of empty chairs and stretched out across three of them. His iPod Touch, held landscape in two hands, floated over his face. Sandra was grateful for the short period of peace. Not so much for Dr. Patel’s assessment.

“I think it’s a dilated pore of Winer,” the doctor said. She had peeled away Tab’s latest bandage and set it aside. As Tab entertained himself by swinging his legs back and forth on the edge of the exam table, Dr. Patel had spent the past fifteen seconds mashing on the borders of his temple wound with her thumbs. She had already examined his throat and pronounced him cured of that affliction. There were no visible signs of strep, although she said he should finish the course of antibiotics she’d prescribed just in case. His bump, on the other hand, remained a mystery. “Not like anything I’ve seen before, but I’m not a dermatologist.”

“What’s a dilated pore-of-whatever?” Sandra asked.

Dr. Patel turned to face her, a pleasant smile on her lips. Sandra could not help but return it. “Really, it’s an oversized pimple. A big blackhead. They happen when a pore clogs. Lots of people have them, but it’s more common in adults and the elderly.

“Right here, you can see an enlarged pore right in the middle of it. The edges are a bit inflamed, too.” She indicated the spot with one gloved finger. “When I press on the sides, no plug comes out, so it’s empty right now. They usually fill up again, though.”

Sandra closed in to examine Tab’s bump. She hadn’t paid its appearance much mind after Tab’s first freak-out. She’d only changed the bandage and applied more antibiotic ointment from time to time. Dr. Patel was right, though. The bump now resembled a tiny volcano on the side of Tab’s head, more pimple than injury.

“It didn’t used to look that way,” Sandra said. “I mean, when we first became aware of it the night of the storm it was *more* like that, but I don’t remember seeing the enlarged pore. The next morning, he had this open, festering hole in his head.”

“You said before you thought Tab had scratched it in his sleep?”

Sandra nodded, not taking her eyes from Tab’s bump.

“Well, that’s one explanation for the way it might have appeared. If it was somehow traumatized.” She turned to Tab. “Did you hit the bump on something? When you were trying to get down to the cellar?”

Tab shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She backed away from the exam table and leaned against the counter lining the opposite wall. “Well, I’m more concerned about the man you say you’re seeing in your closet at night than I am about

your bump. Like I said, it's more common in older people, but it's not impossible for children to get them if they enter puberty early."

Tab shuddered at the mention of his nightly visitor.

"If he hit his head on something and doesn't remember it, that might explain some of the—" Dr. Patel paused, seeking the right word, "—stranger stuff you've been dealing with. A conk on the head can have some unpredictable results. Sometimes they include psychiatric issues like hallucinations.

"Since he says he doesn't know if he hit his head that night, I'd like to do some tests. Let's see if we can find evidence of a concussion." She retrieved a penlight from her coat pocket, flicked the switch, and crouched to meet Tab at eye level. "Stare straight ahead for me." She directed the light from the outer edges of each of Tab's eyes towards the pupil. After a satisfied nod, she switched it off again. Some memory experiments, reflexes, balance, coordination, hearing, and other tests followed. When the work was done, she returned to her place against the counter.

"There are no obvious signs, so that's good. It's nothing to worry about, but I'd like to schedule a CT scan just to be safe. If we're quick, we might be able to get him over to our imaging partner this afternoon."

"No!" Sandra said. It came out louder, more emphatic than she had intended. "I mean, we can't do it this afternoon. We have other appointments we can't reschedule."

"Uh huh," Dr. Patel said. She plucked her laptop from its spot on the stool beside her and pressed a few keys. Was there judgement in her posture? Sandra thought there might be.

"It would be better if we schedule it for first thing in the morning. I can leave my other son with his father tomorrow and spend all day in Hollow River, if we need to."

“It’s whatever works for you. But, Tab? If you start getting bad headaches, or feeling off balance, or throwing up a lot, you need to tell your parents right away, okay?”

Tab nodded.

“If the headaches start, it would be wise to have him scanned as soon as possible,” she continued, turning to Sandra. “Head injuries can cause blood clots in the brain.” She peered over the laptop, her eyes dark, her lips unsmiling now.

And if there’s a blood clot in his brain and it’s not operated on, her expression read, he’ll die.

CHAPTER SIX

“It’s a dilated pore of Winer,” Dr. Clark Clifford said upon examining the bump. Dr. Patel hadn’t seen a need to continue bandaging. There was no open bleeding or scab tissue, so there was no point. It was the single relief both Sandra and Tab had taken away from Dr. Patel’s. Now, Sandra was beginning to think the appointment with Clark Clifford, PhD, and renowned author of a dozen psychology books, might have been a mistake. So far, events had unfolded the same way they had in Tab’s visit with Dr. Patel.

Dr. Clifford crouched on one knee beside Tab. The boy sat on a dark faux leather couch. He seemed more comfortable than he had on Dr. Patel’s exam table. After being introduced to the bump, Dr. Clifford resumed his seat across from them. Sandra sat in a small chair to the right of the couch, not wanting to crowd Tab in case he needed to lie down like patients in the movies.

“I assume Dr. Patel did tests for concussion?” Dr. Clifford asked Sandra, who nodded. “So, we’re reasonably certain you don’t have a concussion. I agree with your family doctor, though. You should get a CT scan. It can be expensive, but better safe than sorry.”

“We’ll schedule it as soon as we’re home,” Sandra said. Both times the scan had been mentioned, her mind had

automatically drifted to the family's savings account. Their health insurance plan was basically a legal scam. "But what we're here about isn't—"

Dr. Clifford raised a palm. "I understand," he said. "Let's talk about the man you're seeing in your closet at night, Tab. Can I call you Tab? Or do you like Tim better?"

"Tab's fine."

"Okay. Tell me, Tab, when was the first time you saw this man?"

"In the cellar the night of the big storm." He rubbed his left eye with the tips of his fingers. Sandra and the boys had been away from home for nearly four hours, much of it spent in the car or in waiting rooms. It must be exhausting for him. Not to mention Jeremy, who remained in Dr. Clifford's waiting room, away from his beloved internet.

"You could see him clearly? Like he was in the room with you? Or was he kind of there, but not all the time? Like a shape in a fog?"

When Tab did not answer, the doctor continued, "Did you ever look at the sun too long? You know how when you blink afterward you can still kind of see the sun's shape if you look in another direction? Did he look like that?"

Tab shook his head, fervent.

"You're going to need to describe him," Sandra prodded.

He sighed. "I mean, I didn't know he was in the cellar at first," he said. "I only saw him later. He looked real to me. He was wearing this tan uh, jumpsuit, I guess? With a zipper going all the way up to your neck?"

"Coveralls? Like your dad wears sometimes?"

"Yeah! Coveralls. Not blue like Dad's, though. And he was rounder than Dad is."

"Okay. What did his face look like?"

"Kind of big around here." Tab stroked his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Wide, I mean. He needed to shave.

I remember he had a red baseball cap on, but he had it pulled down over his eyes, so I couldn't see them."

"He has eyes?" Dr. Clifford asked. "It was my understanding when your mom told me about him that he doesn't. Did you mean you couldn't see them?"

"No! I mean he doesn't have any. He didn't hide them under his cap on the other nights I saw him. One night he said *I* was going to be his eyes, and he showed them to me. He had empty holes where his eyes were supposed to be." He shuddered.

Sandra stretched a hand to him and squeezed his forearm. "It's okay, Tab," she said. "Remember as much as you can."

"He told you that *you* were going to be his eyes?" Dr. Clifford asked. He scribbled on a legal pad propped in his lap.

"Yeah."

"What do you think he meant?"

"How should *I* know?" Irritability had found its way into his voice, a precursor to frustrated tears in Sandra's experience. "How should *I* know what he means by anything? I just want him to go away."

"Of course," Dr. Clifford said, softening. "Of course. I understand. Has the man ever told you his name or anything else about himself?"

Tab shook his head. He crammed the palms of his hands into his eyes and rubbed at them.

"Does he remind you of anyone? Someone from school or anywhere else?"

Again, Tab gestured negative.

"What about talking to you? Has the man in your closet said anything other than what you and your mother told me today?"

"Not much," Tab said. "He said my cat Alfie was fine even though he wasn't with us in the cellar." His breath slowed. His eyes cleared.

“Is the cat fine?”

Tab nodded.

A smile curled Sandra’s lips, unbidden. “He’d do anything for that cat,” she said, and regretted it as soon as the words were out. Dr. Clifford seemed to be making progress with Tab. Distracting the boy with her thoughts and insights might cause him to clam up.

“Okay,” Dr. Clifford said. “Is there anything else? Has the man in the closet said anything scary to you? I mean, he sounds scary, but has he said anything upsetting?”

Tab considered this. “The thing about me being his eyes,” he said.

“Right. How about besides that?”

“No. Nothing I can think of.”

Dr. Clifford leaned back in his chair and, for the first time in what felt like hours, turned his attention to Sandra. Those eyes! Empathetic. Understanding. She became aware of every muscle in her face, struggling to control them so her expression didn’t give away her thoughts. She’d seen *The Silence of the Lambs*. Tim had coerced her into it. She didn’t know whether all psychiatrists had high-powered perception like Hannibal Lecter’s, but it couldn’t hurt to keep herself in check.

“It’s far too early to make a diagnosis, but I do have some thoughts about what’s going on,” the doctor said. “Tab? I’d like to talk to your mom alone for a few minutes, if that’s okay with you. But first, when you get home, I want you to try something for me. If the man appears in your closet again—”

“He will!”

Dr. Clifford smiled, patient. “Yes. *When* he appears in your closet again tonight, I want you to talk back to him. Ask him for his name. If he doesn’t give it, you give him one. If he says anything upsetting to you, argue with him. Okay? Talk back to him. Find out how he reacts.”

Tab's eyes swelled in their sockets. "What if it makes him mad?"

"It might make him mad," Dr. Clifford said. "But if I understand the situation, this man who stays in your closet lives there. Except for the one time you saw him in the cellar during a scary storm. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I think if he was going to hurt you, he would have already. It's possible *he's* scared of *you*, Tab. You're a bright boy and your mom tells me you're an artist. You have a potent imagination."

"What's potent?"

"It means strong, honey," Sandra said.

"Right. It means strong. You're stronger than this man in your closet. Now, I'm not saying it will be easy to talk back to him. But I think if you can do it, and you can *keep* doing it, he'll leave. Do you think you can try talking back?"

Tab thought for a bit, then nodded. "I'll try."

"Good!" Dr. Clifford smiled, the broadness of it building mounds atop his cheeks. Sandra couldn't help but regard his teeth, all straight and a brilliant white. Perfection. Tim refused to go to dentists. "Now, give me a couple of minutes to chat with your mom and we'll be done."

Tab slid off the couch and bolted for the door. He glanced over his shoulder to acknowledge Sandra only when she called after him to catch up with his brother in the waiting room. When the boy was gone, Dr. Clifford set his pen and legal pad aside. He crossed his legs and rested his hands one atop the other on his left knee.

"What's wrong with him?" Sandra asked.

He chuckled. "Wrong?' Absolutely nothing. I want to continue seeing him, though. Tell me, does Tab do certain things with repetition, like washing his hands when he shouldn't need to? Anything?"

“No. Not that I’ve noticed.”

“Does he need a lot of reassurance or comfort? I mean, more so than any other kid his age?”

Sandra shook her head. “No.”

Dr. Clifford scratched his chin. “I have some homework for you, too,” he said. “I want you to pay special attention to his behavior over the next couple of weeks. Regardless of how things go with the man in the closet, I’d like you to watch him for any signs of compulsion.”

“You think he has OCD?”

“Well, it’s possible, but OCD-type behavior can be a symptom of other anxiety disorders. The hallmarks of OCD are the obsessions and the compulsions that are used to relieve them. Repetitive handwashing because of a fear of contamination, chronic confessing to things he thinks he might have done wrong whether he did those things or not. Being overly scrupulous, in other words.

“Tab seems to be going through a fearful phase right now, seeing someone who isn’t there. It doesn’t necessarily mean he has an anxiety disorder or personality disorder or anything. It might be a natural response to something going on in his life. You said you and your husband have been arguing. Then there was the flood. Maybe this ‘man in the closet’ is how Tab’s mind presents things he doesn’t yet know how to cope with. When he learns coping, they’ll go away. That’s one of the reasons I asked him to try talking back, to name the man. Whatever the outcome is might tell us more about what we’re dealing with.”

He cupped his right knee in both hands. “No physical test can determine whether it’s OCD or generalized anxiety or something else, not in the way medical doctors test for things. There are a few things to watch for, though. If Tab is prone to strep infections—”

Sandra sat up straight. “He is! He gets them all the time. He’s just getting over one, as a matter of fact.”

“Uh huh. Have you ever heard of PANDAS?”

“The bears?”

“No, it’s an acronym. It stands for,” he paused, eyeing the ceiling in recollection, “Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders Associated with Streptococcal Infections. Believe it or not, strep infections can cause the sudden appearance of OCD-type disorders or even tics. Practically overnight. Ages three through twelve is when kids are most susceptible.”

“So how do we know for sure?”

“For now, I’d like to see Tab a couple of times a month. Let me keep chatting with him. If he presents in ways other than the man in the closet, it will help guide us in the right direction. He probably won’t have every symptom, but be on the lookout for OCD-type things like we discussed. Look for ADHD symptoms, too, like fidgeting or an inability to pay attention. Trouble sleeping. Mood changes. Separation anxiety. Frequent urination. All of those could be indicators that we’re dealing with PANDAS.

“I should add that one instance of strep and the onset of OCD symptoms does not make a PANDAS diagnosis. Most kids get strep multiple times per year. If the anxiety symptoms worsen in close relationship with future infections, Tab might have PANDAS.”

“Do people with OCD hallucinate, too?”

“Well, not typically in a visual way. Sometimes OCD can cause some sensory or tactile—well, *hallucinations*, for lack of a better word. I prefer *sensations*. These sensations reflect the individual’s specific obsessions. It’s a little like when someone coughs and snuffles near you in a public place and there’s a sudden tickle in your throat. Not the same, but close. And a lot stronger.

“You mentioned Tab’s powerful imagination. People who have OCD and vivid imaginations are most often the people who experience hallucinations associated with the condition.”

A lightbulb switched on above her head. “Tab said he saw the bump turn into an eyeball,” she said. “The man in the closet has no eyes!”

Dr. Clifford nodded, thoughtful. “Right. So if Tab does have OCD, his obsession might be related to his eyes or his eyesight somehow. I can’t say I’ve had other patients with ocular obsessions, but it’s not out of the question. He’s an artist. His eyesight is important to him.”

Dr. Clifford leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “When you’re watching him, find out if he’s doing things he thinks protect his eyes. Find out if he has a classmate that’s going blind or needs glasses. Something mundane for us can be triggering for a child his age. Now, do you have any questions for me?”

“You said there was more than one reason you asked him to talk back to the man in the closet.”

“Ah,” Dr. Clifford said, leaning back again. “Yes. OCD can cause voices—again, for lack of a better term—inside your head to say nasty things to you. These nasty things can be harsh criticisms of themselves or extreme stuff, like trying to convince them they want to hurt themselves or someone else. The man in the closet could be a manifestation of this symptom. Many times, just learning to talk back to these *voices* can minimize them. It doesn’t make them go away, but it can help diminish them to a point. Either way, talking back to this man and naming him won’t hurt Tab.”

He stood, picking up his legal pad and pen as he did, and returned to the desk he’d been sitting at when Sandra and Tab arrived. Sandra got the message. The session was over. She beamed. “Oh, thank you!” she said, rising from her seat. “This has been so helpful.”

“Absolutely. Check with Beth on your way out and schedule another visit. No more than two weeks from now. It was nice meeting you. I hope both you and Tab get a restful night tonight, free of eyeless men in closets.”

He grinned.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The analog touch-tone protested with an irritable *ting* when Tim slammed the handset into its cradle. He wanted to kill the landline, but cell signals in Lost Hollow were spotty. The carrier? Not important. Hell, a tower jutted out of the landscape only a mile or so away, but it made no difference. It was as if someone had enshrouded the mud-hole of a town in a Faraday cage. So he conducted business on the landline in the family's makeshift study, although he wished he'd used his cell today. It might've cut out on him before Chuck Derryberry dropped his bomb.

"Fuckers," he said. "Backstabbing fuckers."

His disappeared great-aunt Kathy's farm remained in his possession. Chuck's company had failed to account for the credit bubble burst and the collapse of the housing market two years before. None of the places they'd bought and developed were selling. They'd also failed to hire qualified engineers. Now they were stuck with a half-dozen investment properties submerged in mud and water. There was no spare money to buy new land. The Derryberrys also now seemed gun-shy about land so near a body of water like Hollow Creek.

"There's tons of stable developers eyeballing your area right now," Chuck had tried to reassure him. "I'm sure

you'll find someone else who wants to take a chance on your farm. It's not a bad spot. It's just not for us."

His speech came off more patronizing than he'd likely intended, as if Tim was an adolescent rejected by a first crush. That only infuriated him more. Worse, the rejection had come after The Derryberry Group had courted *him* about the property, not the other way around. How long might it be before another developer discovered the land and approached him about it? He supposed he could start reaching out to developers himself or hire someone who worked in real estate as an agent. But he had no idea where to start.

Similar to his aunt's place, Tim's farm had been handed down by his father. He'd paid a hefty inheritance tax, but that was the extent of the burden. Kathy's place, on the other hand, had been nothing but trouble. Keeping vandals and vagrants away from the ramshackle general store was a full-time job. *And* there was the problem of paying the property taxes when the property wasn't creating income. Well, Sandra handled the taxes, but Tim often woke with night sweats over the county foreclosing and selling the property out from under him.

Not that he didn't trust Sandra, but...well, these days he wasn't sure he *did* trust Sandra. She seemed unhappy with him so farm focused. It was as if his being home more often had put him in her way. At first, he'd thought nothing of it, figuring the situation was new and they'd grow into it. However, when he'd sat down at the computer in their study, he noticed Sandra had left Firefox open. Her Facebook messages were loaded in one tab and a Wikipedia article about a small town in Massachusetts sat open in another.

It was a violation, but Tim couldn't help himself. He eyed the highlighted name in her messages: Seb Tanner. The minuscule profile picture accompanying Seb's messag-

es depicted a man who appeared to be around Tim's age, except with a chiseled jaw and sparkling blue eyes, his full head of boyish black hair swept to one side by an ocean breeze. Without scrolling, Tim parsed the lines of text.

Seb: Anytime! I'd love to see you again.

Sandra: I can't imagine being able to do it right now. After Tim sells that old place, maybe. I can't believe I'm thinking about this.

Seb: He doesn't deserve you.

He doesn't deserve you.

An invisible dagger stabbed Tim's chest, twisted, and carved its way up into his throat. He tried to swallow the lump but couldn't. His eyes burned.

He doesn't deserve you.

Beside the last word was a tiny thumb's up. He wanted to believe Seb himself had added the emoji to punctuate his final thought in the chat. A closer examination revealed no. It was a Like. Seb hadn't added it. Sandra had.

He doesn't deserve you.

After everything I've done for her, he thought. After everything I've sacrificed.

He stood, forgetting for the moment about the Derryberry call. He was willing to give his wife the benefit of the doubt. Seb could be a lonely old friend she'd become entangled with online and now couldn't calculate her way out. It might explain why she'd handed Seb the sale of Aunt Kathy's place as an excuse instead of considering the kids. But she'd reacted to *He doesn't deserve you* with a Like. There was no defense for staying—for her, for the kids, or for himself—in the Like. It was an acknowledgment by her of Seb's statement as fact.

That hurt.

And there was that Wikipedia page open in the other tab. Tim resisted the urge to click on the About section of Seb's account to see where he lived. He wasn't sure he'd like what he found. Instead, he pulled his John Deere cap low on his forehead. Having spent hours on the old tractor in recent days, tooling around Aunt Kathy's property, he decided to occupy himself by continuing to search for ways to monetize it. Before Chuck Derryberry reached out to him, he'd explored maybe a third of the place. Might as well take another tour. Maybe he'd have an epiphany. Hell, he could develop the land himself. Become a famous real estate mogul with his own reality show like Trump.

He snatched his pickup keys from his pocket and strode out.

By the time he arrived at his Aunt Kathy's old farmhouse, Sandra and the kids would be at their first doctor appointment. He considered himself lucky he'd been busy with the Derryberry call. Otherwise, she might've forced him to tag along. He hated doctors. More, he hated the time it took them to drive the distance.

Her mistrust of the locals remained a sore spot between them. Tim was fine seeing Dr. Reinhold in his office just a few blocks off Lost Hollow's Public Square. Well, *office* was a stretch. Still, there was nothing wrong with the place. Sandra insisted on going all the way to Hollow River. She'd made the appointments and dashed out with both kids in tow. On her way, she'd handed Tim a yellow Post-it reading, *Taking Tab to doctor and counselor. Back this afternoon.* He'd stuck it to the computer monitor while he sat and forgot to grab it when he left. He'd need to remember to grab it before she got back with the kids. Otherwise, she might guess that he'd

seen her Facebook. Angry as he was, Tim was not ready to have that conversation. Not yet.

A sensation of power came with climbing aboard the old John Deere. It doubled when he started the engine, sensing the vibrations along his feet, legs, and ass. Sandra, who seemed to think he was an idiot, might scold him for taking it out without someone else around to watch after him. You know, in case he did something stupid and had an accident.

“You haven’t met every cave, rock, or hole on that property like you have ours,” she’d say. “You might be hurt or killed, and no one would be the wiser.” Her voice prompted momentary doubt, causing him to retrieve his iPhone from his bib pocket, to verify his tether to help in case something *did* happen. Barely a bar.

Whatever.

Sandra was not here now, and he was fine with it. He glanced at the sky, contrasting its blue with the green of the overgrown old fields. They were long bereft of livestock to graze them or crops to flourish on them. A light breeze combed the tops of the weeds and scrub in front of him, beckoning him into their waves. It was a beautiful day for a tractor tour. He smiled, turning his face to the sun.

Fuck Sandra.

The tractor trundled off its trailer. Tim aimed it for the northwest corner of the farm.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tab's eyes drifted closed. The smooth roll along a deserted stretch of highway home and the warm hug of the afternoon sun against his skin made him sleepy. That, and the dumping of the entire past week of his history and each associated emotion and sensation to two total strangers. He loved the heat of the oncoming summer against his eyelids. The light through the thin skin created a red filter over his retinas.

His mom had convinced Jeremy to sit in the front seat, distracting him from incessant picking on his younger brother. Without the chronic threat, Tab could relax, allow his mind to drift. To calm. To sleep. Imagination took over consciousness.

His Strathmore sketchbook slid off his lap. The page to which it was open contained an image of his dad, clad in denim overalls and his green John Deere cap. The figure was seated on a tractor among a field of tall fescue. Tab imagined it green, although he'd drawn the field in No. 2 pencil, so it was really only soft, thin strokes of gray. His dad had carried him from the bed to the cellar the night of the storm. His dad had slept on the floor of his bedroom to protect him. Resentfully, yes, but he *had* done those things. What was so important to his dad that he couldn't come along to doctor appointments?

Land. Always wanting to sell the land. Tab loved his mom, but it was his dad who protected him from the external world: a world full of men and women who held themselves at a distance from others, who spoke in flat and emotionless voices, and who sometimes judged him for being himself. His dad's refusal to tag along felt like a betrayal.

Before he drifted into unconsciousness, Tab had added another character to the image. A wider man stood in front and to the viewer's left of the tractor as his dad closed in on the frame. This man also wore a cap but was otherwise clad in coveralls. His back was to Tab, because he did not want to draw the man's gory eye sockets. This was Tab's new protector, or helper. So he claimed.

In his sleep, an enormous field of green spread out before Tab. Shoulder-height grass and weeds obscured much of the view. A pleasant breeze pulled them apart, caressing his face and allowing brief glimpses further afield. The sweet aroma of fresh-cut straw rode on the air. The scene reminded him of an old episode of his mom's favorite TV show, *Unexplained Phenomena*. She and Jeremy usually watched it together, although Jeremy preferred *Ghost Adventures*.

Unexplained Phenomena had once aired an episode about people who had died and returned to talk about it. He hadn't paid much attention to the show because thoughts of death and dying filled him with dread that was difficult to stuff at bedtime. He'd glanced up from a *Peanuts* coloring book long enough to catch a woman who described flying over a beautiful field of flowers and grass after she had supposedly died.

Was he dead now? He didn't think so. From somewhere in the back of his head, he heard a buzzing sound. Not a bee buzz. More like someone running a chainsaw in the distance. As he concentrated on the sound, it grew louder. In his dream, he spun on the balls of his feet to see his

father's John Deere tractor. His grinning dad sat atop it, bearing straight down on him at high speed. The shadow of the bill of his cap obscured his eyes, forcing Tab to wonder whether his dad still *had* eyes in his head. He tried to scream, *Dad! I'm here, Dad! Stop!*

Nothing came out.

He glanced to his left and his right, seeking a path to run. In both directions, the overgrowth obscured escape. He chose to go right because it was his "strong side," but his feet refused to obey the command to move. He couldn't bend at his knees, either. He couldn't swivel his hips, seemingly frozen from the waist down. No, not *just* from the waist down. When his eyes locked again on the approaching tractor, he could neither move his head nor shut his eyelids. His arms stuck to his torso as if bound by rope.

What's happening to me?

The tractor closed in enough for him to smell its belches of diesel fumes, loud enough to drown his thoughts. Without warning, the grille of the beast lurched into the air at a slant. Tab could see half the tractor's right front tire over the tops of the weeds growing in the shrinking expanse between him and the machine. Dad, whose cap had blown off his head, was in midair on the tractor's left. His eyes bulged from their sockets, engorged with terror. His jaw spread open in a scream Tab could not hear.

Dad!

The flailing body dipped below the tops of the weeds and scrub, after which the earth finally turned loose of Tab's feet. His knees wobbled, but he was able to remain upright. He broke into a run through the green wilderness, toward the spot he saw his father fall. The tractor completed its roll, landing on its right side. Two tires flattened horizontally on the ground. The others slowed to a stop while suspended in the air on their axles. A choking, sputtering death silenced the engine.

From the emptiness, a guttural wail emerged. It sounded like his dad did in the mornings when he gargled the green stuff that burns your mouth and tongue, except louder and more terrible.

“DAD!”

He dashed forward, stretching his arms into a wedge to deflect the overgrowth. Just as he began to fear that he was lost, a clearing opened. There he found the shattered body of his father. The man’s right leg was broken, bent in a nine o’clock right angle at the knee. His left forearm rested above his head. His right lay at his side, the forefinger extended as if pointing at his injured leg.

His eyes were open, blank, staring at the sky. Thick, brownish-red blood drooled from his right nostril and the right side of his mouth. The latter gaped, but his teeth and tongue were invisible behind the pool of blood and bile filling the cavity. An enormous crimson welt arose on the right side of his face. Beside him, a jagged gray stone coated in a thin film of blood protruded from the earth.

Tab knelt beside his father, tried to talk to him, reached out to shake him. The welt on his dad’s face reminded him bitterly of the thing on the side of his own head. His bump began to itch and burn, as if someone had squeezed lemon juice into it, sending thousands of mites living inside into panicky flights. The world around him went fuzzy. Gritty laughter echoed from a distance. Something jarred him.

Then he was awake in the back seat of his mom’s car, staring at the back of his brother’s head.

“Oh, I’m sorry, hon,” his mom cooed from the driver’s seat. She eyed him in the rearview mirror. “I didn’t see the pothole in time to miss it. Are you okay?”

Her words buzzed in his ears, part dream and part reality. The remaining tendrils of the other dimension from which he’d been extracted had not yet shaken free. Reality

still felt somehow *less* real than his dream. “Okay,” he said. He rubbed at his eyes and fingered his bump. It throbbed, hot to his touch. “Where’s Dad?” he asked.

“Still at home, I suppose. We’re on our way from our doctor visits. Remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, mocking the grogginess in his younger brother’s voice.

“Jeremy!” their mom scolded.

The boy grumbled a reply under his breath and returned to the dopamine provided by the screen of his iPod Touch. He was probably still playing *Angry Birds*, a game he’d been obsessed with since Christmas.

“Is Dad okay?” Tab asked. “Can we call him?”

His mom glanced at him again from the rearview, her forehead creased. “I don’t see why he wouldn’t be? I don’t like to use the phone while I’m driving. Why?”

Tab squirmed. “I don’t know. I had a dream—”

“Aww, poor widdle baby had a bad dream!” Jeremy heckled.

Their mother sighed. “Jeremy, I swear. If there’s one more peep out of you for the rest of this ride, I’m taking away your iPod and your computer privileges for the rest of the week. Do you understand me?”

Jeremy glared at his mother, gauging her seriousness. She did not falter. He nodded, reluctant but willing to obey in order to protect his leisure time. And almost *all* his time was leisure time.

“Now, what were you saying, Tab?”

“I had a dream that Dad’s...hurt,” he said. He almost said “dead,” but changed his mind as the words came out of his mouth. It wasn’t that he thought he’d scare his mom by saying he’d dreamed about his dad dying. It was more fear that saying it out loud would somehow make the nightmare a reality.

Mom smiled at him. “Oh, honey, we all have bad dreams sometimes. They don’t mean anything. Except you’re worried about your dad and me. But, listen, everything’s going to be fine. I used to have bad dreams all the time when I was a kid. I mean, they were *scary*. Sometimes I’d wake up not knowing if they’d happened or if it was all in my head. But I’ve been walking the earth for thirty-five years now, and not one time have any of my bad dreams come true.”

“Never?”

“Nope. Never.”

His tummy loosened under the elastic waistband of his jeans. The muscles in his neck and shoulders relaxed as well. Mom sounded certain, and that was a comfort. “Good,” he said.

“Yep. If I know your dad, he’s been on the phone all day trying to get somebody to buy his Aunt Kathy’s old place. More power to him. You saw it when we drove by on the way to Hollow River. It’s almost nothing but mush after those floods. They’d have to deal with knocking down the broken-down old store, too. Seems like a lot of work for something that’s just going to turn into a swamp every time it rains.”

“It’ll sell,” Jeremy said. There was a hint of defensiveness in his voice. “Dad said so.” He cringed then, having apparently forgotten about their mom’s threat to take away his iPod and computer time. Mom only nodded, not taking her eyes off the road.

“Yeah. That’s what he says, alright.”

The rest of their drive was in silence. When they passed the dilapidated old building that was Beard’s General store perched on its tiny Hollow Creek peninsula on the outskirts of Lost Hollow, neither Tab’s mom nor his brother gave it a second glance.

Tab, however, took note of the height of the weeds and dense scrub populating the surrounding field. It triggered

a feeling in him he couldn't place, a recent memory he couldn't quite retrieve. He bore down on it, struggling to recall. But it was as if a veil had been draped in front of it he could neither part nor tear down.

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I made notes, relied on memory, and traveled back in email time to compile these names. If I have neglected to mention anyone, it is not intentional. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to you, dear reader, for picking up this novel and giving it a chance. Thank you.-

—Isaac Thorne

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Thorne is a perpetually starved writer who devours everything horror. He gets stranded in the hills of Middle Tennessee when it snows, but otherwise enjoys living there.

The audiobook edition of Isaac's 2019 novel *The Gordon Place* is the winner of the 2020 Independent Audiobook Awards in the Horror category. In a review of *The Gordon Place*, *Publishers Weekly* stated that "...this work proves Thorne to be a gifted storyteller."

Isaac's 2022 novel *Hell Spring* was a finalist in the Horror category for the 2023 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. *Tab's Terrible Third Eye* is his third novel.

When not writing, Isaac can be found running on a treadmill, reading, or streaming horror movies. He is also addicted to podcasts.

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