

Michael Hayes

Peacehaven



PEACEHAVEN

Michael Hayes

© Copyright Michael Hayes 2019

This is an authorized free edition from www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author and Obooko.

CHAPTER ONE

I AWOKED TO a light burning my eyes. Quick short breaths are working my chest hard and the hands around my neck are relentless. I press down on the asthma inhaler and breathe deeply as I suck the cool spray deep into my lungs. The hands let go. My breathing slows. The light above my head is intense. I brush the lamp aside with the back of my hand and place my hand to my chest. It's there, as it always had been, I roll it in my fingers. Just knowing it's there comforts me. My breathing becomes normal. It's there, this is the day and to me that is all that matters.

In my hand is an old brass key, that has long ago lost its shine, tarnished a deep brown and green. The inscription on the shaft of the key is still legible, 'Remember Sarah.' I read it every day, to remember. The key is attached to a thin strap of leather that hangs from my neck. I rarely remove it, except for this special day of the year which is so important.

The first rays of sunlight are creeping over the Highfields mountains in the eastern distance, displaying a beautiful deep orange, I admire it momentarily, then step off my veranda. I'm carrying a torch, but the sunlight coming is still enough to give me some confidence. A heavy fog is beginning to drift over the small town of Peacehaven.

I take a deep breath and I taste the cool, moist, morning air. It tastes good. I leave my home behind me, making my way along Mocatta Street with streetlights barely visible in the thickening gloom. Shop fronts that would soon come to life for the day stare out like dark empty eyes sockets in the mist.

I like to walk; it always clears my head and helps me to think. More than any other day I choose this day for my path to remembrance. The only day of the year I visit Green Acre Cemetery. I've made the trek for these past forty five years. I often spend the day there, just talking and remembering, what once was and what could have been. Head lights drift out onto Main Street, the first of the mine workers that mostly populated the town now, driving to the New Acland coal mine.

Soon the road will fill with them, so I pick up my pace. I pass R and K Accountants to my right. I can see the dark shape of the Pioneer Hotel looming in the distance. I leave the road and walk along the streetscape among the jacaranda trees. The leaves hang heavily with dew; the large drops rain down on me as I pass beneath. Their flowers mat the ground beneath my feet giving off a pungent decaying odor that hangs heavily on the moist air.

I reach the town limit as the darkness surrenders to the morning sun. The mist hangs low and thick across the nearby paddocks as I make my way along the bitumen surface. I follow the road as it takes me on a wide sweep to the right. The rays of sunlight that are breaking through the mist gently caress my face and I feel good, better than I've felt for some time, but a nagging thought crept into my head.

I knew it was him. He wanted to get inside me. He was trying to close the curtain forever. To stop something I should remember. The thought hung deeply, just a whisper. I pushed it down, tried to ignore it and pushed on.

A crow broke the stillness with a piecing cry to my right. I watch it sitting in a dead iron bark tree, watching me, those dark penetrating eyes, judging me. I try hard not to look but those eyes won't leave me alone. Ahead the road dipped across a creek. The sign reads Little Comoran Creek. I hurry across, stepping through a trickle of water from the previous night's downpour still running off from the surrounding hills.

I gaze back at where the crow is perched, it sits there still, its eyes fixed firmly on me, it grins. Of course, I know it didn't, but still it mocks me, laughing at something only a crow could understand.

I leave the creek. I continue following the road. I pass Coleman's and James Roads then the road opens out onto a straight stretch that I know so well. I push on through the morning which was promising a warm summers day but still something gnawed at my mind.

My head feels as if full of rats, hurriedly devouring my mind, before they could be discovered, like a rat chewing on a nut. I round the cemetery turn off; my legs are beginning to tire. I reach the large green gates of the cemetery by eight o'clock that Wednesday morning.

The rusty iron gates stand across the path in a defiant gesture. The green paint is flaking off the iron in large pieces from corrosion. Nature slowly rotting away what once stood proud. From around my neck I retrieve the brass key, given to me by Sergeant George Hillman, the only key left in Peacehaven that would ever fit that lock again.

I slide the key into the keyhole, the inner mechanism moves with the force of the key, emitting a dull clunking sound. I push the two gates apart with a defiant screech. No one has been interned in the cemetery since George closed the cemetery gates forever. Closed for a reason no one in Peacehaven could tell you or remember, even if you could find someone who could.

I return the key to my neck and step through the gates. The fog hits me hard. Like ghostly fingers reaching for me. I hear the screams in my head, I stumble. It screams my name as it did on that night. Deafening as if my head would explode, my head aches. For the first time since that night I was certain it had found where we buried it. A blackness, deeper than I had ever seen it. It wanted to engulf me, swallowing me whole into its own world. I feel as if I'm falling.

Blackness comes.

I awake, the headache is gone, but the curtain is closed. The sun had been replaced by the shine of the moon and surrounded by a billion stars, making a night as beautiful as I could ever wish for. The evening is warm. I struggle to my feet, discarding the coat I'm wearing.

A backpack lay beside me, inside I find a torch and something cold touches my chest. Have I laid there all day? My headache was gone, replaced with the fog that feels as if it is swirling inside me. I feel the coldness on my chest again, I touch it, something hard. I pull it from around my neck.

By the moonlight I can see it is a key. I shine the torch on it. On the shaft of the key is engraved, 'Remember Sarah,' was this something I was supposed to remember? Why I was here? My head feels clear but lost, I make my way through the head stones.

With the help of the torch I read each head stone as I stumble through them. A statue of Jesus is sitting high on a concrete block, carved into the marbled surface was 'John Kruger Died 1913,' I'm in the old section of the cemetery.

A crow suddenly called in the distance, it startles me, I stumble backwards, falling onto a

grave surrounded by a steel spiked fence. The spikes dig into my chest driving out my breath. My chest burns. I groan heavily pushing myself back to my feet. I feel under my shirt, the heat and swelling has already begun.

I scan the graveyard with the torch until two small faces emerge in the light. On a grave before me sits two small angels with expressions that fill me with dread. Their little arms outreaching, staring towards the heavens as if begging for God to take them home now their earthly task is done.

The crow called again. I follow the sound. I use the torch, but the distance proves too far to see without a more powerful light. I pass the older graves and find recently interned plots. One freshly dug grave was surrounded by a makeshift fence that held teddy bears and toys of every kind. My torch settles on a framed picture of a young boy resting on the head stone.

I can hear beating wings high above me. Something swoops past my head. I raise the torch searching the night sky, it's gone. The crow calls again; I swing the torch around to see it on the boys' head stone. There it is, I don't know how, but I'm sure it is the same. But logic tells me crows don't call or fly at night, but there it sits, it's eyes blacker than night reflecting the torch light.

"Jack?" the word escapes my lips before I realize I've even spoken it.

With a sudden flap of its wings it takes to flight again. I try to follow with only the sound of its wings beating in the night to guide me. I follow it until the headstones end, opening up to a clear area at the rear of the cemetery. Here, even without the torch, I can see four white head stones, on the first from the western end of the cemetery, sits the crow.

I approach, until the light makes visible the owner of the grave. 'Here rests a reminder that Henry Thompson will always be loved and missed until he finds his way home to us.' Then the crow takes to flight again, once more disappearing into the night. I follow to where there were no graves. The end of the cemetery. Where the bushland begins.

In the far corner of the cemetery is a large circle of cleared earth. I find the crow waiting for me there. It dances around the edge of the circle without stepping on the raw earth. I step to the edge. Not a blade of grass or weed grows within the circle, no leaves or twigs rest on the earth. Is there something buried here? Something I should remember or is it something better left forgotten.

The crow lets off another loud caw and takes flight. I follow to the western corner of the cemetery. The wires of the fence are rusted and broken. A path barely visible by the torch light leads me through a short distance of bushland. I follow it. Large wattle trees are casting their ghostly arms over the path, forming a tunnel around the path itself. The yellow flowers fill the air with a sweet perfume. I follow until the path ends at a small cleared area where the trees had been removed and the area well-tended.

In the center is a small concrete block. The torch beam hits it; the light reflects back. The crow makes its presence known with a loud caw then lands in the clearing. It hops towards the block. With a tap of its beak it pecks at the block. I approach. I stand over the concrete block, studying it. Set into it is a small plaque, inscribed 'Remember Sarah,' The crow leaps into the air and is gone, I guess its task is complete for whoever or whatever sent it here.

The curtain opened a crack, but it was enough. I'd forgotten Sarah and Henry and the others. 'Remember Sarah,' no, I haven't forgotten, it tried to make me forget. It closed the

curtain, but it couldn't keep it shut.

I lock the cemetery gates and slip the key back over my head, I hurry as fast as I can, with a new determination burning within me. My legs ache, but I push on, I feel a new purpose, more alive than I've felt in years. I turn off Main street onto William Street just around midnight and see the familiar lights guiding my way home.

I stumble up the stairs, my body shaking with excitement rather than weariness. I rush into my old room, on a small desk beneath a dust cover, under my old bedroom window sits a typewriter and not just any typewriter. It is an Olivetti Lettera 32 Typewriter. When the Heritage Bank on Main Street closed down and the branch moved to Toowoomba in the year of 65, they held a clearing sale. "They were practically giving them away," father had said when I first set eyes upon it.

I wrote a lot, mostly short horror stories and mostly just for father and myself. He would often sit in his chair and read them over and over, never was he judgmental, always giving "constructive criticism" as he called it. Mother never read them, "Tap, tap, tap... that's all I hear in this house anymore," she would often remark even though she never intentionally tried to put a stop to it.

I pull the dust cover off; it looks as good now as it did all those year ago. I carry it out to my kitchen table. I put a fresh ink ribbon in then set about brewing a fresh pot of coffee, stronger than I would normally like. That done I seat myself; I feel scared but motivated, maybe even angry that I have waited so long for this.

I begin.

The good people of Peacehaven have forgotten, except for those like me, if there are any, who it touched the deepest, but the curtain is slowly but surely closing. Today, being the twenty ninth day of January, I walked out to Green Acre Cemetery, to visit 'Gods waiting room,' not the cemetery itself but behind the cemetery were the empty coffins were buried. I even heard it once called 'The valley of the lost'. I always preferred the latter.

I covered over this typewriter once, just to let it die, out of fear of course. I've seen what fear can do, I've seen what it did to this town and the people in it. It took everything. I'm sitting here now and here I will stay until everything is remembered, so it will never make me or anyone else forget and if I ever do, I can read it and remind myself that it really did.

CHAPTER TWO

Around the same time Mr. Whitlam was pronouncing "Nothing would save the Governor-General," on televisions across Australia something terrible came to the small town of Peacehaven. Whatever it was, when it was gone, it closed a curtain over the towns people, as if it had never happened, which in the end is exactly what it wanted, to sneak in, to take and leave everyone it touched doubting it was ever really there.

My name is Allen Joe Thompson, for as long as I can remember people have called me Joe. I was born to John and Mary Thompson in the spring of 1961. Since mothers passing, I've lived alone at 100 Mocatta Street Peacehaven. I never married, I have no children, when I die my family will die with me. So, what I'm writing will only serve as a reminder to myself

or whoever should find and read this.

I've spent my entire life in Peacehaven. I have never had the desire for greener pastures, I've always been happy here. My working life has been spent as a ground's keeper at the local State School and when not there, I tend to people's lawns and gardens and any other odd jobs they might require. I do like to keep myself busy.

My father once told me, if you were looking for God you could always find him in Peacehaven. It holds religious denominations of damn near every kind of faith you could ever want. There's a Catholic church, a Lutheran church, a Methodist church and all kinds of Cristian fellowships. But for this story I'll only tell you about the Anglican church.

'A Peaceful Little Town,' the sign at the town limits used to say. That was when, 'small towns had big town pride,' as Father would have said. To anyone passing through that town it would seem as normal as any other, where people looked out for each other. You know the kind I mean. You could leave your front door open all night long and children could play safely in the streets. Believe me, it was once that way, but things change, in a way even now I'm not sure I understand.

Listening to my father speaking those words, they seemed true and always would have been if not for the smell of bourbon lingering on the air. My father knew his way around a bottle better than most, that's a fact. As far as memories go that's the strongest of my father, sitting on the end of my bed, as he did often. He was a very strong man, in strength and morals, but had many weaknesses, in the end though I'm sure it was Mother and her beliefs that forced him to walk out into the night and never come back.

To me Peacehaven will always be home. I've spent a lot of time here trying to shut the darkness out, but it always comes when I close my eyes. I feel it slithering. I know it watches; it comes in my dreams. I can feel it desperately trying to get back in. It calls to me and maybe one day it will stop, but to forget would be to invite it back in forever.

For most of my fifty five years, from the age of fourteen, I've lived in the light. I surround myself with it. Lights of every kind fill my house so there's no dark corners for it to hide. I only keep what I need in my house. Long ago I got rid of anything that could hold dark hiding spots. Hiding spots like under a bed or under a couch, places that I can't see, and it can. I've always slept on the floor and don't keep any unwanted furniture, that I don't need.

My house lights come on automatically at six o'clock in the evening, I also have a generator in my shed that comes on should the power fail, so I'll never be in the dark. Its watches me constantly, I can feel it, it's still angry for what happened on that night, wanting its vengeance and perhaps after all this time it deserves it.

I dream of it when I sleep. Awakening in fear, into the light breathing heavily, sweaty, afraid, that's when I wish I could change it. To go back before it started and do things differently, to make it not have happened, although it did. That day, I wish I could forget, I've seen a thousand times in my dreams.

I remember, that day felt off the moment I awoke. The air was thick, humid, heavy clouds threatened rain all day. I was in the Peacehaven Public Library. My smaller brother tags behind as he did ever since the day Mother decided Father was never coming back. "You're a young man now," she'd preach at me in her scolding tone of voice, "It's time you behaved like it." And so, from that day my younger brother became my burden.

The rain fell heavily, making it hard to concentrate on what I was reading. I read a lot,

Mother said I read too much, but Father said, "leave him alone, reading is his escape," and at that time it was. I remember staying lost in those books all day long, not wanting to ever come back.

Henry hated the library. As usual he was pestering from one of the isles to go home. His backpack was already filled with books he would never read. I always tired of it so that day I told him angrily, "Just go home!"

I watched him leave. He disappeared into the darkening day. I quickly found it impossible to concentrate on my book. If Henry came home without me, I would never be allowed at the library again.

I stuffed my books into my backpack and chased after my younger brother. I ran through the rain on that early summer day, taking little notice of the water filling my shoes and the heavy drops stinging my face. I crossed Mocatta Street. I passed the looming pioneering man statue standing in the center of the streetscape. With an axe resting on its shoulder it stood defiantly with its back to the westerly storm. I ran with determination, the kind only a boy who would certainly get banished from his love of books could gather.

My intention was to reach home before mother finished her shift. She worked in the kitchen at the Kingsthorpe Memorial Hospital. I couldn't allow my brother to get there first and fill Mothers head with stories of my neglect of him, so ignoring the cramp building in my side, I pushed on through the storm.

I stayed at the library far too long that day. I kept my brother waiting, for which even still today, I hold myself responsible. My friend Sarah started as part time librarian that summer. She had located the books I had requested, I was excited, I simply lost track of time in my eagerness to dive into my new book.

I hadn't noticed how dark the day had become until the streetlights flashed into life, even though they did little to light the deepening darkness. Henry left Edward Street nearing the crest of king Street. Water rushed down the gutter past him and was consumed by a drain struggling to cope with the deluge. His backpack pulled heavily against his tiring shoulder. He stopped and adjusted the weight. The sign for William Street swayed violently in the wind. A clap of thunder echoed behind him as he neared the center of the road. That's when the black Valiant first arrived in Peacehaven.

Its headlights emerged slowly from the gloom. First tiny specks distant in the rain, growing as the growl of the engine echoed toward him. He stepped back to the side of the road, stumbling on the broken bitumen edge. It neared, purposely stopping in his path. Its engine roaring menacingly from beneath the restraint of the hood.

Its head lights were eyes that could see him. Its chrome grill that glistened against a nearby flash of lightning were teeth that could snap, chew and swallow. To Henry and to a nine year old's imagination. It was a monster. Emerging from some dark place where only such a monster could exist.

Henry felt a chill grip at him, like ice crystals growing across his skin. He stepped back onto the bitumen, closer to the car, a voice deep within him told him to run, he pushed it away. He stood straining his eyes against the impenetrable darkness inside the window. Lightening filled the sky above him but the darkness inside the valiant resisted it.

He stepped closer and placed his hand on the car bonnet. He knew the bonnet should feel warm. Once when father was fixing his old Ford truck, I told him to not touch the

engine, it would be hot, and he would get burnt. The bonnet felt cold against his hands. He pulled his hands away. Momentarily he stood on his toes to see through the windshield. All he saw was darkness in between each stroke of the wipers.

With his heart beating hard in his chest with the rhythm of the wipers he watched. The door suddenly opened. Henry stepped back in surprise. A waft of stale air hit his face, forcing him to turn his head. The smell filled his senses making his head spin, a smell so thick it covered his tongue. He tried to swallow it away. He had never smelt anything so sweet before, even in the all-consuming storm the smell drowned out everything.

The darkness, it called to him. As gently as a mother singing to her newborn baby. It filled him with promises of love and warmth. It told him it would never lie to him. He would be happy and have everything that he had ever dreamed of. All he had to do was let it in. Henry climbed into the valiant, sinking into the bucket seats. The door slammed shut behind him. He wasn't afraid. He was a big boy now despite what Joe had told him. He wouldn't be afraid because the voices told him not to be.

Henry wasn't sure he was inside a car anymore. He felt for the latch to open the door. It was none. There was no handle to wind the window down like in fathers' truck. He heard the voices again, they came from all around him, he listened, they whispered to him. Childlike voices, playing, calling to him, his head swam from it.

He doesn't realize, the darkness within the car is beginning to move. Swarming, slithering, forming into many shapes. He did not want to resist, to fight back would be to refuse it. The voice said it was alright and for Henry it was. He felt the whispers and the darkness creep into his mind, cold and wet, until he became one with it, Henry was gone, and the laughter turned to screams.

I found my brothers backpack at the edge of the road, unsure why it was there. He would be home by now, telling Mother how I had abandoned him, in many ways I had. I carried it the rest of the way home with the intent of giving it back to him, on the promise he would say nothing to Mother. Because that is where he would be, waiting for me. And even though I know he's still here in the darkness, that was the last time I ever saw my little brother.

CHAPTER THREE

It was the day after my brother disappeared, the town erupted with panic. People never went missing in Peacehaven, least of all a child. Search parties were formed, men from Kingsthorpe, Hayden and other surrounding towns joined the search. Every property was searched within the town limits, every dam and creek was dragged looking for his body. Nothing was spared. They searched anywhere a small boy might be hiding or fallen into.

Mother and I spent a lot of time putting up posters. Mr Watson had an old Chandler and Price printing press in the back of the Peacehaven post office. He printed out posters for mother for free. Mother only had to pay ten cents apiece for the paper. She found the most recent photo she could. It was from school picture day. He had a big goofy look on his face that people wouldn't soon forget.

Mother drove fathers old ford truck. We put them on every wall, notice board and under every wind screen wiper we could find. Hoping against hope to keep Henry fresh in

people's minds. Time passed, hope faded and all the agonizing prayers that mother said to God made very little difference in bringing Henry home.

It's strange how reality can come home to you. Very much like a sledgehammer to your face. It certainly did just that. We heard that old gate that led through off William Street to our front door open with a rusty cry. It was then that it all came home. It was Sergeant George Hillman pushing his way through the gate, he had a priest following behind him.

There was no doubt about it, it was very difficult for Mother, time went by and we barely spoke to each other. That's how it was on that Saturday morning when we first met Father Longford. I sat silently eating breakfast when we heard the gate open. My stomach sank. I watched the expression on her face slip into one of despair. Even though I found it hard to believe she didn't realize this moment would come.

There would be no happy ending, she would not open the door to find my brother there. He would not be escorted by the police safely home. She would not sweep him up into her arms feeling the emptiness wash away. That would not happen for her and when she opened the door something closed inside her forever.

Peacehaven's only policeman stood on our doorstep, accompanied by a priest, a priest I had never before seen in Peacehaven, He stood twisting his police hat nervously in his oversized hands, "Good morning Mary," he said.

"Never mind the pleasantries George, say what you've come to say," she said.

"Very well, I hate coming here like this, you know that, but you also know the search for your boy has been scaled back, since there has been no new information to work off, so I've been told to inform you," he struggled with the words, mothers reluctant stare cutting through him, "The search for your boy is being called off."

She stood silent. I saw a tear running silently down her cheek. "If you cared that much George you would know his name is Henry," the words barely escaping her lips. Her body began to tremble.

George stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. She looked surprised although I do believe in that moment she gave into that embrace and for the first time in a long while I saw a warmth in her, even if only for a moment.

"Henry... of course... I'm so sorry Mary," He said, she then pushed him back, her composure coming back to her like a brick wall. He stepped back with the priest.

"Look Mary, we've known each other for a long time now, I think I can be pretty straight with you. Now of course, I'll still be doing everything I can to find Henry," he added, "but officially it's a child abduction case, with no sightings or new information the search is exhausted, all we can do is wait and hope someone comes forward with something for us to go on."

The Priest stepped forward with a warm lopsided smile covering his face. His dark hair slicked back revealing deep penetrating eyes, "Mrs. Thompson, I'm Father Longford," he said, his voice deep and unfaltering. He offered his hand to her, she held it momentarily and it still hung there after the welcome had ended.

"Father Longford is the new Anglican Priest," George added, "I know you're a very spiritual person, so I asked him to come along today to offer you some

comfort,” and of course, mother took it blindly.

“The church is finally opening?” she looked genuinely surprised, bringing a slight smile to her face.

“It is, I’ve been supervising the renovations, from afar of course, however it is done. In a manner of speaking Gods house is open for business.”

She welcomed them both into our home, gave them tea and orange cake. The Sergeant sat awkwardly on the couch as if expecting to be scolded at any time. The priest sat on the edge of the couch, leaning towards her, gently sipping his tea between two fingers. Quotes from the bible flowed freely, filled in with promises of God’s love and certainty Henry was in Gods care.

I had a firm understanding of the bible at that age, even though not the trusted believer mother would have liked. Mother spent a lot of time reading the bible. Sometimes she would read it out loud, mostly for my benefit, so most of what the priest said sounded familiar if unwanted.

Quietly I sat listening to every word with a strange emptiness eating away at my stomach. On any other Saturday morning, Henry would be sitting opposite me eating his breakfast, but all that sat there was an empty chair.

Mother came into the kitchen, cut George another slice of orange cake and returned to the conversation, that’s when the subject turned to funerals. A wave of anguish washed through me like a tidal wave; a funeral would make it final.

The priest said it would give mother closure and let her move on. I hated the idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dr Manish, the Peacehaven doctor, had made a house call to check up on mother that night. The smell of old spice cologne drifted from the hallway into my room, not a terrible smell, but a warm and comforting one that always made me feel at ease. I would later find out the cologne was an attempt to disguise his smoking addiction. An addiction that would eventually put him into respite, dying slowly of lung cancer. His deep Indian voice echoed from mothers’ room, although muffled, it sounded very soothing.

He made regular house calls. Leaving mother with sedatives to help her get through the night. I often found myself unable to sleep myself, sometimes most of the night or sometimes I would be woken by her talking in her sleep. She talked randomly, mostly of Henry. It would normally be followed by a late morning sleep in.

The day my brothers’ empty casket was to be buried I woke tired and restless. The air in my room felt hot and thick. I found it hard to breath. I pulled the blind and lifted the sash window. Leaning outside I greedily breathed in the morning air.

From my window I could see the length of William Street to where the Anglican Church stood. The entrance doors to the church were being opened. A dark figure stepped out into the day. He raised his hand to shield his eyes as if the early morning sun irritated them. He

composed himself briefly then stepped out onto the church yard lawn. I watched with fascination as he strode purposely to the church bell.

At the front of the church yard stood a solid hardwood frame, painted brown with a green dome at the top that housed the bell. Around the frame grew yellow calendulas, in the center of the frame a large sandstone slab had been placed, for the bell ringer to stand on when he brought the bell to life.

The bell hadn't been rung since Father Ray, the previous priest, had a massive heart attack ringing that very bell. I was only five at the time. It was on the third ring; the entirety of Peacehaven could recall it, that is if you could find someone who could remember. Three rings, then the father fell silent forever, underneath that bell, crushing the yellow calendulas.

Now a new priest was ringing the bell. With each pull of the cord the bell sang, echoing across Peacehaven, calling its faithful to a spectacle the likes of Peacehaven had never before seen. Noises came from Mothers' room; the bell had the desired effect.

I hadn't been inside the church since Father Ray fell silent, Mother and Father would take me every Sunday morning. Father was usually dragged along complaining under his breath all the way but sitting silent once in the pews.

Third from the front and always closest to the center. That's where we sat. Staring at an empty coffin.

George helped mother pick it out. They sat at our kitchen table going through catalogues, as hard as it is to imagine that there's a catalogue for something dead people are buried in. Like it's some kind of train carriage that's going to deliver you to heaven's door and you want to be arriving in the best looking one.

That's how it seemed to me, even though in some morbid way it was very beautiful. Mother said it had to be the best, for her son, and in the end, she decided on the Nilsen Pecan.

It was a solid child size coffin made from solid poplar timber with a single mirrored tier lid, it was painted in a white smooth gloss shine and fitted with six timber handles and lined with a bed of white imitation silk. I know this because mother was proud of her choice for a casket that was never going to deliver anyone to heaven or anywhere else.

I sat, feeling very uncomfortable. It wasn't very long before I found it difficult to look at the casket. I settled back into the pew and watched as people poured into the church. Some people I knew, others I either went to school with their children or they were a part of mothers' church group or were just here to bear witness.

I sat and listened to the whispers. To each other and to themselves they came. "Look" I'm sure they were saying, I could hear them, "look at them mourning over an empty box." I wanted to get up, I wanted to run from that church, run from the craziness of it all. They continued to stare. Even when I stopped looking, I could feel their eyes, there penetrating judgmental eyes, but I sat just the same and I grasped the edge of the pew and held on till my fingers ached.

I took a deep breath. The smell of burning candles filled my senses. It hung heavily on the air, like ghosts playing in the colorful rays of light that cut through the dimness from the stained glass windows. Behind the alter, hanging from a wooden beam was Jesus nailed to

the cross, his sad eyes gazing towards the heavens. The blood from the crown of thorns, spear and nails always looked fresh, filling my young body with an uncertain childlike respect.

Two altar boys dressed in their red and white gowns closed the entrance doors to the church, then sat on a small wooden bench to one side of the alter. They did not look at all interested in being there. Then Father Longford emerged through the cloak room door. He positioned himself behind the alter gazing over the packed church, his flock. The entire church fell silent. Waiting and listening.

Ready to swallow each and every word that came from his mouth with such certainty it would lift them higher than the heavens.

In his hands he carried a bible, he placed it on the alter before him. A thin red material marker hung from the book. He opened it there. He lifted his head, ran his eyes over the attendees momentarily, then put his attention back to the bible.

He began to speak and even I was impressed with how quickly he won them over. "It's very pleasing," he began, "To see so many of the good people of Peacehaven here today," his voice spoke with confidence.

"Even when God is testing us, even by taking one of our children you show absolute faith in him by being here today," There wasn't an eye in the church that was not captivated by him, Mother sat solemn, nodding her head gentle in some kind of muddled agreement.

He lifted his head again, his eyes the deepest black I have ever seen, like the depths of the darkest night, a night that could sweep in and consume. His eyes went from person to person as he spoke, "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting all the members of my new congregation, but God sent me here with a purpose and together we will get through these dark days."

"Just remember, the door to Gods house will always remain open to you while I serve here. No matter how small or large your suffering is, bring it, bring it to me and like Jesus on the cross, let me carry your burden," he said, then paused for a moment, "Now please stand and pray with me to the Lord."

Prayers were followed by hymns and the church erupted with song It seemed like a thousand voices. Mother knew every hymn by heart of course. She sang with such pure honesty, like her faith would never falter. She seemed at times to drown out everyone else. I did not feel much like singing myself, even if I knew the words, but I did allow a few words to escape my lips at the end of each chorus.

The service continued, until the last prayer was prayed, and the last hymn was sung. The coffin was removed from the church and placed in the Hearse. Which was in many ways, a carriage for its final trip to heavens gates and off we went. I sat in the back of the police car, mother in the front. I watched the long line of cars following us and I felt condemned. A young boy who was hit by a reality that a young boy should never be hit with until they have lived. From that moment on everything was certain. Henry wasn't coming back and life was changed forever.

CHAPTER FIVE

To find Green Acre Cemetery all you need to do is travel five kilometers along Kingsthorpe Hayden road, North from Peacehaven. But as the name suggests there is not and never has been anything green about it, it was merely a cleared patch of land which was deemed long ago unfarmable. You had to pass through a set of large iron gates to access it, once inside the surrounding bush was so thick with undergrowth you were locked in. As for the green part, it was merely rock and dirt, too hard to grow anything but native wire grass to ever be called green.

That's where I stood in the bright morning sun at my little brothers' funeral. I was already sweating profusely in the heavy black suit mother insisted I wear. The lining scratching at my skin like tiny claws. I stood there before a hole in the ground that seemed to go down forever. Freshly dug earth sat in a neat pile with the smell of the fresh earth rich in the air.

Around the open hole green synthetic grass had been placed. It draped into the hole as if it were being sucked inside. I leant forward to see closer, the darkness didn't stop. I suddenly felt faint, dizzy, as if I would fall. I wobbled on my feet momentarily then steadied myself. The bottomless hole grinned up at me. That hole that would go on forever, perhaps all the way to Hell, should you fall in.

It's funny sometimes, how a child's memory works, sometimes you can't remember the little things no matter how hard you try, then there's others that make such an impression that you never forget. Like the very first Christmas you remember since being born or tasting candy for the very first time. One that stuck in my head like an invisible scar and I swear to God himself I still hear it in the silence, it's the sound that casket lowering device made.

Burying an empty coffin, to me always seemed peculiar, like a promise that will go forever unfulfilled. Its purpose to put closure to something that should never be closed.

Much of the population of Peacehaven had turned out to witness the spectacle. Mother sat in the middle of chairs arranged in an orderly fashion to one side of the grave site. George and I sat on her left side. Members of her church group took the seating on the other, offering her occasional comforting words. The remainder of the crowd had gathered on the opposite side of the grave. Waiting like birds on a wire.

Four men carried the coffin. A coffin small enough to hold a nine year old boy, if there had been one in there. The four men looked as if the weight of the world was inside that small box. They stepped carefully around the gaping hole, being careful not to drop it and placed the casket onto the lowering device straps.

In front of the grave stood Father Longford reading from, as mother always put it, "The Good Book of God," even though at that time there seemed nothing good about any of it. He waved his arms around with every word that came from his lips.

A tall overpowering figure dressed in black. His dark hair slicked back from his penetrating eyes. They dart back and forth as he spoke to each and every mourner standing grave side. His clerical collar wrapped so tightly around his neck it bulged outward as he emphasized every holy word.

Mother looked content; no tears dampened her eyes. Even though I knew deep inside she

was hurting. She put all her trust in God. She hated letting emotions show, which did nothing to soften her, that was my Mother, solid till the end.

Father Longford's service concluded, and the casket began its decent. The soft, barely audible ticking sound drowned out the deafening silence as it lowered.

That ticking noise, to me was the most horrible of sounds. Like clicking teeth swallowing up the casket. The sound filled my head, making my legs shake. I wanted to scream, demand that it be stopped. A soft thud emitted from the hole signaling the casket had reached its destination and the ticking faded away like an unwound pocket watch. I breathed deeply, relief flowing over me, and that's when Mother fainted.

People swarmed around her. Helping her back to her chair with caring words and gentle hands. I turned my attention from Mother, her church group hovered over her like bees in a hive. I watched Father Longford staring at her with a peculiar lop sided grin beginning to show on his face. His eyes held an empty stare, void of any emotion, no more concerned with mother's grief then a cat would be with a mouse.

He saw me watching him. His expression quickly turned to one of scorn, as if I had caught him in a moment of weakness. Like a heat wave shimmering on hot bitumen I saw a sneer, it shimmered then it was gone. Broken from his trance he stepped around the grave to offer Mother help.

George drove Mother and I home, Mother sat in the front seat not saying a word. He glanced solemnly at me through the rear mirror, his eyes genuinely concerned. But as fake as the funeral was, my heart ached for Henry. My life and my world were changed and even though I did not realize at that time Peacehaven itself would shut down and that is just what happened when the Telbert twins went missing.

CHAPTER SIX

As a child growing up in a small town, summertime was the best time, especially in Peacehaven, when the last school door had closed behind the last child everyone knew the summer had begun.

Summers were spent swimming, bike riding and loving the freedom only a child not held down by educational routine could feel. You could play in the streets long after the crickets had started to sing, and the milky way shone down on you with all the glory of the heavens. Even the air felt good, not thick and polluted as it was in Toowoomba.

I first met Paul Wright and Tim Jacobs when their families moved here to work at the brick factory on West Street, the industrial area of town. They were a lower class working family, "Of the Catholic persuasion," Mother would have put it as if it was a class distinction, but in many ways, they were just the same as me and we hit it off right away.

Paul was a skinny blonde haired kid whose hair always hung in his eyes and always told jokes that were rarely funny. He also had webbed fingers on his right hand, a result of placing his hand in a toaster when he was five, or at least that's what he told everyone. No one at school would hold his hand and we nick named him the 'Swamp Thing,' from that old

black and white movie we saw once when our dads took us up to the drive-in cinema at Kingsthorpe.

Tim was much chubbier with a buzz cut and coke bottle glasses and was also the biggest Dr Who fan there was, he could name every episode and which villain starred in it; I don't think we got together without the subject ever coming up.

Their families moved away when the plant shut down in '82. Last I heard of Paul, he was doing well, married with children and owned his own real estate business on the Sunshine Coast. I heard Tim died in a car crash, his wife and child with him. Hearing the news of his death did fill my heart with sorrow, not because someone I hadn't known for a long time had died, but because someone I remember from my childhood had. I remember how he looked each day, the things that made him laugh and how that boy and I were good friends. I guess I just miss those days.

The only treasurable thing to come out of all the darkness that lay ahead was that Sarah Hillman was my friend. We became best friends and loved, like only two kids can love, a lifetimes worth in one short summer. She believed everything I told her. She trusted me more than I trusted myself and if I could I would make it so that it never happened. "Never look back, you'll only see where you've been and not where you should be," and it's those words that helped me get through all those years.

The library was situated next to the Peacehaven Council Chambers. You accessed it from Main Street, along a covered concrete path that led to double glass doors. When you entered the doors, the checkout desk was to your right, with a lounge area to your left. Walking past the checkout desk, you would find six shelves of books that extended almost to the rear of the room.

Once you'd passed through the corridor of books, the space opened up onto a reading area. There stood three tables that you could read at or research whatever you wanted, and that's where I usually sat. But first I needed a new book having already discarded my old books into the return slot.

My dream was always to write books like my favorite authors Dean Koontz and Stephen King, the latest offering was from Dean Koontz 'A Werewolf Among Us'. I reserved it the moment I knew it was available and found it waiting for me on the reserved trolley. But like most dreams you dream as a child they go south very quickly once the real world takes hold. Mother never quite understood my fascination and quietly despised them. But even now I have never lost the hunger for them.

Books to me, are like a doorway to any world I wish to escape to, I could be fighting a war in some far off land one day or taking off in a spaceship towards a distant galaxy the next. I could fly higher than anything that would wish to drag me down could go. But when father left, and I lost my biggest fan, all of the desire to write left with him. But I never lost my hunger for books and in many ways, it was books that bought Sarah and I together.

After Henry disappeared and mother was reborn, to something I preferred to distance myself from. I found myself spending more time at the library. That's how it happened. My head was in a book. My mind a million miles away where nothing could find me when I heard a voice.

"I was sorry to hear about your brother," the voice said, it was Sarah Hillman, I had known her my whole life. Our birthdays were three days apart, we were both born in the Kingsthorpe Memorial Hospital. It made best friends of us and good friends of our parents.

She lived on the western side of town and attended the same school as I did. Her father was George Hillman the police Sergeant. Her mother had died when she was very young. They were not an upper class family by any means, but a good family, just the two of them.

She started working part time at the library at the start of spring. I hadn't seen her since Henry's funeral. I looked up into her face, her long red hair was hanging down past her shoulders. A blue band held it neatly back from her face. Her eyes bluer than any I had ever seen before or since. She pulled a chair out from the table and sat down, "Hey buddy," she said pushing her gold octagonal glass's back onto the bridge of her nose.

Maybe it was hormones racing through my young body like a Melbourne Cup winner, but I guess I was just at that age. Every time our eyes met; I felt a fluttering in my chest. "Hey," was all I could get out, the warmth of her smile flooded over me and for the first time since the funeral I felt a tear working its way down my cheek. "I want him back Sarah," I said wiping it away with the back of my hand.

She reached across and grasped my hands, "I know you do, so do I, so does everyone," she added.

"Do they, I don't know, Mother acts as if nothing has happened at all," I said pulling my hands away from her grip.

"Give her time buddy, I'm sure after the funeral it would have put some closure to her mind."

"She still cries at night... you know, in her sleep. I'm not even sure she knows she does it."

"Hang in there it'll get better, give it more time."

"You think so."

"I know so, tell you what why don't you come along to the youth group with me tonight."

"We have a youth group?"

"We do now, the new Anglican priest, Father Longford, he's trying to empower the youth of Peacehaven," she said raising her voice in an attempt to sound empowering, then she looked at me with her wide eyed smile, "Never look back, you'll only see where you've been and not where you should be," and then she was gone and I couldn't help but smile as my mood began to lift.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Talbert twins, at that time, seemed strange to most other kids. Identical girl twins, their mother dressed them exactly the same, they wore the same hair style and even finished each other's sentences. They were smart and they knew it.

They were what you might call straight A students and then some and they didn't mind letting you know it. Which was the biggest reason the kids at school disliked them I suppose. I even heard whispers that they were selected to attend the University of Southern

Queensland, even at that age, but they never got the chance.

Instead they met Joey Stanford. He was what you might call upper class, that is upper class for Peacehaven. His parents owned the Stanford Brick Factory. One day it would have all been Joey's, of course he didn't want it, all he wanted was to leave Peacehaven behind him for good. But Mr Stanford would have none of that and threatened to cut him off if he didn't take an interest. He should have just bided his time, cause soon enough the investors would start questioning why the mill was running at a loss.

In the eyes of young females, Joey was a bad one and that seemed to attract them like ants to a picnic. I did hear it was Susan Nelson who talked him into doing it. She could talk him into doing anything. They were a regular Bonny and Clyde that's for sure, that is without the bank robbing and stuff. She was his girl, and everyone knew it. I do believe together they kept the local convenience store in business on account of all the cigarettes they smoked between them. Most kids tended to just stay out of their way or watch out if they didn't.

Now Joey wasn't what you would call an academic, he was older than most other kids in grade ten given he was kept back a couple of years. He was fit and strong and could even turn the heads of most good Christian mothers when he had his shirt off at the local pool.

No, there never really was much of a future for Joey. I even heard on the school yard hot wire, that's what we called it back then, that it was suggested to him that he should just drop out and go work for his father, but he never did.

Susan Nelson, now she was pretty in a rough kind of way and I'm sure the subject of many young boys' desires. She always wore her blonde hair cut off at shoulder length, even though she was a natural brunet. She had some fetish around tartan plaid skirts and tight shirts, you rarely saw her out of them, and I can tell you this, she had the nicest legs a girl of that age could have had. She always drew attention to herself especially when the two of them would pass, daring the young boys to look. Of course, they did, even if it was like looking at the sun.

The twins, like most other fifteen-year-old girls had their eyes placed firmly on him. You see, the twins didn't exactly live like other children. Their mother sheltered them from the outside world. They were rarely allowed to leave the house or attend things other kids attended. She drummed the bible into their ears twenty four hours a day and pushed them to succeed and in some ways, it was that that killed them.

Because in the end they were fifteen-year-old girls, with the same fifteen year old urges running through their young bodies as any other fifteen year old girl has. So, when Joey Nelson swaggered up to them at recess, they really didn't stand a chance. He charmed and delighted them as only Joey could with talk of fun and excitement that the girls had only dreamed of. But that wasn't what they had planned for the poor Telbert twins.

Together the two pretended to sleep when their mother left their room. Their prayers done, their parents kissed goodnight, and everyone safely tucked away for the night. You see, their parents had absolute trust in the girls, after all they were good girls, they attended church often with their parents. They helped with the chores and always had their schoolwork done on time. Their parents were proud of them, that's for sure. That's why they could never have guessed the girls would sneak out of the house to meet a boy like Joey Sandford.

The intent was to lure them to 'Crossover Lane'. The 'Lane' being a road that led off from the Kingsthorpe-Hayden road and ended on top of a hill on the outskirts of town. The hill provided you with incredible views of the distant Bunya Mountains during the day. Even though I can't imagine they were there particularly for the view. The 'Crossover' part was local talk that young couples would go out there to consummate their union.

Once there Joey would string them along into a very compromising position where upon Susan would take pictures. Not, for their own pleasure but for the enjoyment of the twin's parents. Once they saw the pictures, no amount of money would be enough to make them go away. Then they could use the money to get out of Peacehaven.

Of course, the girls never showed up to meet Joey. It was just after midnight, and near the end of the bottle of scotch they had borrowed from his father's liquor cabinet. That was when Susan and Joey gave up their dreams of leaving Peacehaven and walked home. It was around half past midnight when Susan separated from Joey and another half hour past that that she saw the black valiant pull up beside her.

It was around Ten o'clock that the twins were making their way along James Street, when the black valiant pulled over beside them. The Priest was familiar to them. Being two good Christian girls, they knew better then to refuse a lift from a priest. The first thing the girls noticed about the inside of the valiant, before the door closed was the sweet smell.

The twins were smart, and they knew the impenetrable darkness that came when the door closed was completely wrong. If they could have seen the lop sided grin that covered his face, they would have thought that was wrong too, but they didn't. It wasn't until they felt the wet and cold shapes slithering over their bodies that they began to cry.

Joey never breathed a word about what they did. The twin's parents never found out that the girls only left the house in the night because of him and to Joey, that was just fine.

The twin's parents owned and ran the post office on Main Street, they lived in a small weather board house that sat right behind the post office. They were good hard working people like most people in Peacehaven at that time. When the twins vanished, she fell to pieces, just gave up like a sulking bull and cancer wrapped its fingers around her liver and she died not too long afterwards. And not too long after that he sold the business and moved into the new Yakana retirement village up in Toowoomba.

It's hard to know why people just give up, the light just dies inside them, their will to see the journey to the end fades away. I guess they just simply let go or it's just easier than to face the overwhelming loss. A loss like losing two children would place on someone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Before the twins vanished, the summer days were beginning to roll by into weeks. Life even started to become more normal, as normal as it could anyway. I attended the youth group with Sarah each Wednesday and Saturday, we had a lot of fun and it became so I looked forward to those days and the summer would have gone on that way if not for the police patrol car that came down King Street with lights flashing.

It was eight o'clock on that Wednesday evening. I was blindfolded in the Peacehaven Hall surrounded by six other kids being pushed backwards and forwards, in some kind of attempt to build trust. I heard the patrol car door close and whispers came from all around me. I removed the blind fold I was wearing.

There wasn't an eye in the hall that wasn't watching George stride across the yard, up the stairs and across the hall to where Father Longford stood. He spoke briefly to Longford. The worry visible in his features. Longford nodded and put his hand on Georges shoulder as if reassuring him.

"Gather around everyone," Father Longford called everyone, "the Sergeant has something very important to tell us all."

Sarah looked at me questionably and we both sat to hear what was obviously weighing so heavily on him.

"As of this moment the town of Peacehaven is under curfew while we search for Katy and Paula Watson who have been missing since last night."

The children talked amongst themselves for a moment then one asked, "Is this the same as before?"

"It's far too early to jump to that conclusion. It is being treated very seriously though. So that's why the youth group will be ending as of now and I want you all to go straight home. There will be no more youth group meetings till further notice. Is that understood?"

"I trust, you'll keep us all informed of your progress and of course tell their parents the girls will be in our prayers till their safely home," Father Longford added, "alright children gather your belongings and we'll do exactly what the Sergeant said."

"Sarah and Joe will come with me and again I'm sorry about this father." He said, already turning and heading for the door.

"No apologies required Sergeant, when a lamb is lost a good shepherd rests not until it's home safe," he added.

"Uh huh," the sergeant threw back as we left the priest standing in the doorway of the hall.

The patrol car left the hall yard, loose gravel crunching noisily beneath its tires. The flashing lights of the patrol car sending colorful rays of light spraying across darkening homes readying for sleep. It was a clear warm night, a large full moon visible through the towering ironbark trees that bordered king Street. George reached across and flicked a switch, killing the flashing lights.

I didn't want to ask but I knew and somehow he knew I would, "Is it the same as before?"

A heavy sigh escaped him. For a moment he seemed to search for the right words. I saw Sarah's hand briefly reach across and touch his leg, "I'm sorry Joe, I am hoping more than anything the girls are found, and it doesn't have to be this way, but it looks just the same as before. They've gone without a trace just like... he stumbled with the name," Henry."

"Is it someone from Peacehaven doing this?" I asked.

"I don't know, but for now promise me you'll stay home after dark and I'm deadly

serious about that. It looks as if the girls snuck out of their room during the night.”

“Snuck out, why?” I asked, more to myself than to Sarah or George.

“Joey Stanford,” Sarah added, “he’s been leading them along for a while now and it’s not surprising, their mother never lets them out of that house and they’re at the boy crazy age.”

“The what?” George sounded confused.

“Oh dad, it’s like boys being crazy for girls, they would have been desperate for the attention and a boy like Joey can lay it on pretty thick.”

The patrol car swung onto William Street and eased into our driveway. I opened the door, George leaned across, “Don’t go over thinking this Joe... alright, just remember it might not be what we think,” he said, I nodded, closed the door and watched them disappear onto Main Street.

The rusty gate loudly announced my arrival. I pushed through and saw the lights of the valiant shine out from behind the Anglican church. They bounced and waved as they left the car port. Then danced through the ironbark trees that bordered the eastern end of William Street, then shone directly toward me.

The distant sound of the engine grew louder as it approached. I stepped back into the shadows. It cruised past slowly, almost deliberately, as black as the night, it’s chrome fittings glistened against the moonlight then disappeared into the night. I closed the gate and saw a light flick on in Mothers’ room.

I wish it wasn’t the same, I wish I could tell you that, but sometimes life is not a fairytale and sometimes there are no happy endings. The search was exhausted. The twins were never found and so it was that Sergeant George and Father Longford payed a visit to the Watson household and two more empty caskets were buried to give the parents closure that would never come.

CHAPTER NINE

I wasn’t surprised, when Sarah’s voice crackled through the two-way radio that rested on my bedside table, waking me from my sleep. George had given Sarah a pair of retired police two-ways as a present. He instructed us to only use certain channels so only the three of us knew we had them. We had been talking to each other over the devices most of that summer and when she told me about the meeting, I quickly got dressed, crept out of the house and made my way to the hall.

Not many people knew, but if you entered the Peacehaven Community Hall via the back door. That is without letting your presence be known. You could make your way to the catering area. Once you had reached the catering area, you could enter the large walk in pantry that held all the catering equipment. Then if you were to go directly to the back of the pantry, there you would find a fake panel that you could easily remove. All you needed was a ten cent piece to unscrew the four screws that held it there.

Once removed, the opening exposed a service ladder that led to the ceiling, so maintenance could be done on the large lights that were used to light the stage. When you

climbed that ladder, there was a steel platform that you could sit on with a perfect view of all the hall. You would be hidden so deeply in the shadows that no one could see you. That's were Sarah and I sat.

We watched the towns people enter the hall in small groups. We watched the priests take their place on the chairs arranged before the stage. The last one of those priests was Father Longford. He entered the hall with a confident stride, taking his seat without even acknowledging the other priests. He sat there quietly, searching the room with wondering eyes. For a moment his gaze fixed firmly on our location.

A cold chill prickled my skin. I locked onto his stare unable to pull away. Until the sound of heavy boots on the hardwood floorboards pulled the priests attention away. George entered the hall and immediately had everyone's attention. He walked to where the priests sat. Briefly nodded to each of them, then confronted the attendance with fingers hooked firmly into his belt.

Mostly, the people of Peacehaven liked and respected George, not just because he was the law enforcement but because he was one of them. He had moved here as a young policeman early in his career, he had married and lost one of the towns daughters and he was just a decent man that you could not help but like and respect.

"Alright, I'm going to keep this brief, as you are all aware by now, we have two more missing children and I need to be out there looking for them, not here talking to you. Also, you would know it is well within my power to lock this town down and that is exactly what I intent to do."

"What are you doing to find them?" Mrs Watson asked/

The Sergeant ignored the question and continued without even looking in her direction, "Roadblocks have been placed on every entrance to the town, every vehicle coming in and out will be searched, you will all be at home by six o'clock. If anyone is caught out after that without my permission, you will be brought in for questioning. Am I being clear enough? Questions anyone?"

"Are... are they living here... with us?" she asked again rising to her feet, her voice shaking, "the basterd that took my girls, is it one of us?"

"I'm not saying that, but all precautions are being taken."

"If all precautions had been taken when the first child went missing, my girls might still be here."

"We don't know that," he replied.

"It could be anyone here," she began to point, "It could be him," she pointed again, "It could be her." She burst into tears, "It could be anyone that lives in this God damned town," she screamed, people turned and stared at the outburst.

They watched as her husband wrapped his arms around her, gently forcing her back into her seat, "It could be anyone," she sobbed one more time.

The sergeant remained calm, looked down at the floor momentarily as if pondering his next words. Then raised his hands in a calming gesture before saying, "As I said... we just don't know at this point in time to make speculations, but rest assured I will be working very closely with your church leaders. I will inform them of everything that comes to hand

and they'll keep you up to date on how the search is proceeding."

"If you have any more questions, speak to your priest," he said already breaking away from the meeting and heading for the door.

The crowd sat silently, watching George leaving the hall, even before the doors had time to swing shut Father Longford had taken Georges position.

"The Sergeant is absolutely right in his actions," he began, "If indeed there is a wolf amongst us, he will do everything humanly possible to find it and with God behind him I'm confident justice will be swift, and our lost children will be returned"

We watched Father Longford talk; the towns people listened as if every word was absolute. There wasn't an eye in the building that wasn't fixed on him, looking for salvation, for answers to give them hope. He had none of those answers. Even the other priests listened contently as if every word was the truth.

He spoke on about standing united, resisting against evil, being able to love and trust your neighbour and above all else, how God will punish those responsible. Those that would dare steal a lamb from his flock.

It was a site to see. I guess you could say he was gifted. How he could take so many people and instantly calm them was a site to see. Giving them the answers, they were searching for even if they weren't the answers they needed. When he finally told them to be vigilant against evil and to all go home, they left the hall like sheep fleeing the slaughter yard, even the other priests left without saying a word.

Sarah and I sat till everyone left and the hall fell into darkness. I felt afraid not just for myself or Sarah but for the population of Peacehaven. That's when Sarah reached across and held my hand, I squeezed it back and instantly I felt the fear melt away.

We climbed back down the service ladder and left the hall as if we had never been there. I walked Sarah home with the bright summer moon over our shoulder. We held hands and talked as only two teenagers could. It was a clear summers night and a blanket of stars filled the sky. A distant rumble came from the west, followed by lightning flickering along the horizon. Most homes had darkened for the night and the town seemed peacefully quiet.

We stood outside of Sarah's house; we were lost in our own thoughts. The house was dark, the porch light cast it's light out onto the lawn. George was not yet at home. Even in the darkness I could see the worry in her eyes, "I know," I said.

"I don't think it will ever be the same again," she added, a look of concern clearly etched in her face, "The town I mean, there's something different here now and I don't know what, not just the kids going missing but, I don't know... something."

"Maybe everyone's just scared."

I shrugged, casting my gaze up among the stars, "I'd better get home, before George arrests me," was all I could think to say.

She chuckled lightly, "I guess so," she replied quickly leaning toward me and pressed her lips against mine, "Night buddy, call me when your home."

I watched her disappear into the house, then made my way toward mine with the taste of strawberry lip balm on my lips and a spark of fear smoldering at the bottom of

my stomach.

In many ways fear is like a seed. If the seed is planted, all it requires is to be fed, it will grow tall and strong and cast more seeds, until there is a forest. That's how it is for people, all it takes is one, one becomes two and in very little time two fills an entire town.

CHAPTER TEN

I guess it was always human nature, that people should turn on each other. Soon after the twins went missing, people looked at strangers untrusting and accusingly. Fingers were pointed and the fear fed anger. The good towns people attacked strangers for stopping in the town and not long after that people no longer stopped in Peacehaven. In the end I believe it was best for the town and the people to be blocked off from the outside world, even if it was Father Longford's idea to do so.

The roadblocks were maned twenty four hours a day, each and every vehicle that came in and went out was searched as promised. Of course, they found nothing, but put together the curfew and the roadblocks and the town was as good as isolated.

For the most part the good citizens of Peacehaven followed the curfew. Come six o'clock, husbands left for work, mothers took children to school and day to day activities flowed on. But come three o'clock parents were waiting for their children at the school door. The school bell would ring, children would flow out in an almost orderly fashion. Parents would scoop them up and be gone without barely saying a word.

The town was quiet. The normal afternoon activities ended, there was no more bike riding, road tennis or the sound of children playing on the skateboard ramps of the lions' park. Children were kept inside in fear. Husbands came straight home after work. When six o'clock came around the town said goodnight.

I don't believe it was much of a surprise when police cars arrived in force to conduct a house by house search in an attempt to find the missing children.

People willingly opened their doors, more so to prove their innocence to the rest of Peacehaven, then to find the missing twins. But then there were the priests, there to comfort the poor members of their congregation. There for them in their time of need or to be there just in case the children were found and fingers were pointed.

It was hard on some people, having their homes invaded. From what I heard some were all but ransacked. I even heard old Mrs Flanagan collapsed when a young cop came out of her house yelling that he had items that matched the missing twins. I heard she collapsed, right there in front of her own house, damn near died. It was common knowledge she had a bad heart.

The find was quickly dismissed, turns out the items were clothing that belonged to her own grandchildren. The search went on for days right down to the last house, still nothing was ever found. The police eventually left deciding that if the twins were taken, they were no longer in Peacehaven.

Mary Telbert found no comfort for all their efforts. The empty caskets were buried, and

her daughter's fake funeral was endured. As before, the towns people attended the funeral with a mixture of sorrow and amazement. To this day I believe it was more from relief, relief it wasn't one of their own among the missing.

The twin's disappearance soon faded from people's thoughts. Although life decided it was not quite finished with Mary Telbert yet. Cancer wrapped its fingers around her liver and squeezed the life right out of her. Visiting Mary became a daily routine for Dr Manish. Visiting twice a day to deliver morphine.

People do like to talk, and I heard lots of it about Mary screaming out in the night. From pain or insanity, I don't know, although I would imagine by the time the cancer got what it wanted it was both.

Like Mother would have said, "Small town talk, from small town minds." I even heard other kids making fun of her and kids being kids I had to hear it for myself. Even though I wish I had never gone, because once you hear something like that, it's very hard to unhear it.

So, there I was, sneaking out of my room. Which in those days wasn't hard, Mother sleep very soundly. I didn't need a torch, by that age I knew the town like the back of my hand, and I mean that. I snuck out and made my way down Main Street to where the post office was. The moon that night was hidden by clouds. The buildings sat in darkness.

I stood in silence on the footpath in front of the post office. Beside the pharmacy ran a corridor that divided the post office from the Café. There was a gate at the front that block the passage. I opened the gate slowly, unsure of what noise it would make to give me away. The hinges were well oiled. I closed and latched it behind me, the path was covered with white pebbles that even in the dark could be clearly seen.

With each step the pebbles crunched under foot, sounding like an elephant walking on broken glass. My heart beat hard in my chest. I reached the end of the buildings which opened up onto a half acre allotment. In the middle sat the Telbert house. A small weather board house with a veranda that wrapped around the building.

The path led me to the front stairs. I stepped off the path, onto the lush kikuyu grass that hadn't been cut for some time. Mr Telbert always took exceptional care of the yard. I guess in his own way he gave up on that as well. Losing your only children and in a way losing the future that you had to look forward to would destroy the strongest of men.

My feet sank deep into the grass. I walked into something sharp, it stung me through my jeans like cats' claws. I hissed out through clenched teeth. I plucked the rose bush branch away from my jeans. The rose bushes dotted the lawn. They were hard to make out in the dark, mere blotches in the darkness. I carefully avoided them, making my way towards the house.

The fragrance of geraniums filled the air. They were planted densely around the edge of the veranda. I reached the front stairs. I placed my right foot on the first step, applied weight and listened. Far off in the distance a dog barked then fell silent. I tested my weight on the step again, it did not creak under my weight. I listened again for something or anything that might swoop out of the darkness and drag me away from my objective, to hear an old woman dying.

I climbed the stairs, confidently scanning my surroundings. A large wooden door stood in

front of me with two windows on either side of the door. I pressed my face against the glass and peered in, nothing but darkness and shadows with the occasional flickering of a broken lamp bulb that should have been replaced. It was the living room as I would soon discover.

At the end of the veranda, on the northern side, I could make out a squatter's chair. I don't know why but that was where I sat myself and waited. I'm not really sure exactly what I was expecting to hear but I laid back in that chair. I watched the lightning skim across the horizon from the coming storm. I fell asleep right there on that chair.

"Give me back my girls you fucker," a voice screamed from within the house, jolting me from slumber.

I couldn't believe I'd fallen asleep, in a chair that did not belong to me, on a veranda that did not belong to me and on a property that did not belong to me. I should have gone home, but then I heard the crunch of pebbles, my body jumped with fright and I lowered myself further into the chair. The approaching steps had already reached the stairs. They were climbing the stairs. I stayed where I was, confident whoever it could be, could not see me on that moonless night.

"They're not yours, their mine you bastard," Mrs Watson called again.

I raised my head above the arm rest and saw the dark figure crossing the veranda. It disappeared through the front door. I listened until the footsteps silenced. I lifted myself from the chair making my way quietly to the door, there I found it ajar. I stood silent, listening, I heard nothing. Trying to control my breathing with my heart nearly exploding from my chest. I stepped inside. A light came on deep in the house cutting out the darkness.

The light helped a little to make out my surroundings. I had stepped into a living room. I could make out a couch, bookshelves and a large television in the far corner. Ahead of me was a hallway and at the end of the hallway, a door was open, casting out light. I stepped lightly, listening as I went, all the while a voice screaming in my head to run, run until your home safe in bed. I shock of the thought and crept forward.

I passed a bathroom to my right. The smell of lavender soap and deodorant drifted out into the hallway. A bedroom was to my left, I could make out a bed that looked occupied. I'm sure it was Mr Watson, accustomed to sleeping through his wife's night terrors, sleeping through whatever or whoever was happening in his wife's room.

I passed another door that led to the kitchen and dining room. I could hear voices, too muffled to understand. I stopped before reaching the door. A vile odour of vomit and sweat hung thickly outside of Mrs Watsons bedroom. I leaned forward; I could see the corner of her bed. I stepped sideways, inch by inch, keeping the line of the doorway and her room to the center of my vision.

Another inch was all it took to see Mrs Watson laying on her bed, her face to one side, held down firmly by two hands. On the left hand was a silver ring with a black stone inset. The figure was whispering something into her ear. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't see the face, I dared to lean in further.

That's when Mrs Watson saw me. Her eye's looked wild with fear and what I'm sure was insanity. She opened her mouth and screamed, "Give me back my girls you Fucker!"

Her scream startled me; I was sure my presence was known. My mind and body connected and before I knew it, I was running. I ran through the house, taking the front

stairs with a leap. The pebbles crunched loudly all the way to the corridor gate. I found it open. I sprinted blindly out into the street, running straight into the black valiant parked in front of the post office.

My hands rested on its smooth surface momentarily. It felt cold for such a warm night, a coldness that quickly crept into my hands. I pushed myself away from it, with a quick sidestep I was behind the car and running down Main Street.

I heard the footsteps following, across the pebbles, through the corridor and the front gate was closed. I raced along main street shaking the cold from my fingers. I avoided the streetlights that would quickly give me away, weaving my way along the gutter until I reached the junction of William and Main Street. A deep gutter led to a large drainpipe. The pipe cut under the end of William Street. In the dark I was certain I could not be seen, I crouched there.

My shoes sunk into the muddy soil at the bottom of the drain. The dampness crept up my jeans. I crawled to the top of the gutter and looked back along the street. A dark figure came out from the alleyway, standing on the footpath it searched the street. I watched, my heavy breathing starting to slow. The figure got into the car. I heard the engine start, the sound echoed along the street then disappeared into the emptiness of the night. It inched away from the pharmacy, making its way north along Main Street until its rear lights dimmed then vanished.

I rolled onto my back. The night felt cold, my body began to tremble. I don't know how long I sat in that ditch, but I do know I was afraid. Sarah is the only person that I have ever told why I went to the Watson house. An easy way to explain it is that stupid kids do stupid things I guess. I went to that house looking for something that had strangely excited other kids, but all I found was a lifetime of regret that I ever went there at all.

I dragged myself out of that ditch making my way home. Without waking mother, I bathed and slid into a warm bed with heavy eyes. I picked up the two way, flicked the button at the side, the bright florescent light lit up. I can say honestly, I did want to call Sarah and tell her everything, I flicked it back off with my thumb and returned it to the bedside table and sleep quickly took me.

Mr Watson rose at five o'clock that following morning. He needed no alarm. It was a lifetime habit, born from a lifetime of work. Up at five o'clock and at the post office by Seven. But these days were like none other. He rose at five o'clock from the guest room where he slept, since Dr Manish had pulled him aside and told him his wife had less than a month before the cancer would take her.

He went to the kitchen, turned on the radio, found the classical station that she loved to listen to when she was well. She would play it while she did housework and pottered around the garden. He turned it down low, knowing the sound would easily carry through to her room. He filled the kettle and switched it on.

The kettle whistled sharply as steam billowed from the spout. Gently he lifted it from the gas cooktop and poured the water over a tea bag in her favorite cup.

This job done he would change her bed. As the cancer had progressed, the night sweats began, she suffered terribly. He would often wake to find the entire bed wet, so he had decided the best thing to do was to use the spare bedroom.

Once the sheets were changed, he opened the house. The fresh air would blow in,

carrying all the perfumes of the garden that she loved. The fragrance helped her to feel better. Those jobs done he would leave for work.

I guess it came as no surprise, but no comfort, when the cup of tea fell from his trembling fingers at the site of his dead wife. The tea spilt over the carpeted floor, covering his black oxford shoes. He calmly kissed his wife's cheek, feeling her deathly cold skin on his lips, he told her he loved her and called Dr Manish.

When all was said and done. When the catholic church committee stopped coming to see him. When the funeral was condemned to memory. He closed the post office for the morning and left his house on that warm Friday morning. He went to Mr Wilsons antique shop and brought a small silky oak table.

He carried it home and set it down in the corner of his living room. On it he placed the urn containing her ashes and next to it he placed a picture of her. Beside the picture was a small green vase that he took from Mrs Telberts collection of green depression glass that she had displayed with pride. In the vase he placed pink roses, her favourite, then got dressed and went to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rabbit trapping was a pastime Father took very seriously. I didn't much see the fun side of it myself. A good bag was grounds for bragging rights at the Pioneer. It was something even mother approved of, something about "Gods bountiful harvest." But I preferred how father put it, "It's well spent father and son time." In those days most farmers would let you onto their property to take as many as you wanted, that's until the myxomatosis virus put an end to it.

Fifteen old style gin rabbit traps, that's what we used. late on a Saturday evening we would go out to Jim Pearson's farm, out on the Hayden Road. He was a dairy farmer, also one of dads occasional drinking buddies. I would be woken before the sun had even touched the horizon and off we'd go in his old ford truck. Mother still drove it long after he left and, in her words, it was 'Small remuneration for years wasted.'

Most of the traps had rabbits caught that day. Father was always happy with what he got, never setting the traps again until the last rabbit was eaten. I never complained, mostly because it made him happy. I didn't much like the taste of rabbit much anyway. I'd often go to bed hungry with half eaten rabbit stuffed in my pockets which later was thrown over the fence to the neighbor's dog.

Now before I tell you this, I swear to God himself I haven't thought of this since then. We were retrieving the last of the traps along the Cooby Creek side of the farm which was a large open flat. For a reason best known only by himself a young crow had stepped into the very last trap. He was fluttering around in a mad panic when Father pulled up next to him.

What was clear, was his leg was broken. He just sat there, staring up at us with those black eyes, shaking and scared just about as much as any living thing could be. Father said it would be kinder to finish him off, but I begged him not to. So, we scooped him up in a hessian bag and took him home.

We splinted his leg, bandaging it as best we could. It took him a few days to calm down. He got used to my coming and going and it wasn't long before he was taking small pieces of meat from my fingers. Time went by and he quietened so much he would sit on my shoulder like he thought he was some kind of parrot.

Father took a liking to the bird as well. I was really surprised when I came home from school one day to find him waiting for me in the kitchen. "Might be time to take that birds splint off, so he can stretch it out," he said to me. I went to my room to collect him but found the box empty I'd been keeping him in. "Are you coming or what?" father called from the back yard. I descended the staircase quickly and raced out into the back yard.

I found father with one of his grins, from ear to ear and both hands in his pockets. He looked proud of himself and that made me happy. He was standing next to a freshly made coop and sitting up as proud as punch on a perch running through the center of that coop was my crow.

"Wow... you made that just for him?" I asked.

"You bet, took most of the day too."

"Joe..." Father started to say, "I do think it's time you gave him a name, after all you can't just call him crow, now can you."

"I want to call him Jack, short for blackjack," I replied.

"Then Jack it is," he bent down and looked the bird straight in the eye, "welcome to the family Jack," we both laughed. "Now let's get that splint off his leg."

With his leg mended he hopped around the coop letting of excited caws. We both laughed harder than we had for some time and if it wasn't for the fact he had lost his job the day before and the drinking really started we would have laughed a lot more.

The trouble really started on a day that seemed no different to any other. I was in our yard playing with Jack. Mother was hanging sheets from the cloths wires that father had strung behind the shed. I'd taught that bird to fetch small sticks and bring them back to me, like he was a regular dog. Mother walked past; a basket full of dry sheets balancing on her hip.

She stood in front of me, staring down in her own scornful way, "Look," I said, then throw the small stick. Jack was sitting on my lap. He watched the stick skim across the ground. When it settled, he hopped of my lap and with the big hops the way only a crow could he made his way to the stick. He picked up that stick in his beak and hopped right back to my lap, dropping it into my hand. I looked up at mother excited, "he learnt really quick," I said, hopping for a look of agreement, but finding only a blank expression with one raised eyebrow.

"I hate the way those black eyes look at me Joe. It's like we've welcomed the dark man himself into our home," I just sat there watching, confused I guess as she disappeared into the laundry. For a young boy, it's hard to understand how a woman could be so hate filled.

In the end she got her way. I came home from school to the sound of Mother and Father fighting like they mostly did at that time. I heard it before I even got though the front gate. Not wanting to go in the house I went straight to Jacks cage. The gate was open, and he

was gone. I understood immediately why they were fighting.

A well of anguish released inside me. I cried, more than I can remember doing before and when I felt that strong hand on my shoulder, I turned and hugged Father. Big sobbing breaths shook my young body. Behind the tears I felt anger, I looked at Father, "Why does she do it? Why is she so mean?"

For the first time Father had no answer. He knelt down in front of me, wiped my tears away with his hand, "Don't hate your Mother son, it sounds crazy, but I honestly believe she can't help it."

"But why?"

"When somebody believes in something as much as your Mother does, there isn't a thing in this world that can change it. All you have to remember is your Mother loves you and Jack loved you too."

Mother had decided there would be no more evil in her house. She gave Jack a piece of meat knowing he would take it trustingly with a sprinkle of strychnine added. She found the bottle in Father's shed that he often used to kill rats.

Together we buried Jack underneath the macadamia tree that grew at the rear of the yard. To my knowledge that's where Jack still is today.

That's the first time, in a long time, that Jack has crossed my mind, but that night he plagued my dreams and I woke with a fright into the following day. The sun was only just making its presence known on the eastern horizon, I flicked on the two way, the yellow number two illuminated the darkness. I hit the speak button with my thumb, static crackled, "Sarah... are you awake?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

My Malvern star hit the gutter hard, almost throwing me from the bike as I left King Street and entered Edward Street. The rain felt refreshing against my face, my eyes heavy from a restless sleep. Jack remained in my thoughts. The Sunday morning service had dragged on. Father Longford didn't dwell on the missing children, but a prayer was said for their safe return.

George was sitting two rows behind us with Sarah. He was called up to give a report of how the search was continuing and as expected he had little to report. Except for people to stay vigilant and report anything suspicious. He also made a point of adding, even though the curfew is no longer in affect he will still be performing night patrols.

Father Longford stood behind him as he spoke, his lip curled up to one side in his usual lopsided grin, those deep eyes darting back and forward scanning through the parishioners. George thanked Longford and returned to his seat.

"Thank you, George," he said waiting for him to be seated, "As you are all aware, the very best man is working tirelessly to bring our missing children home, now let's say another prayer before finishing off."

When the prayers were done people began leaving in single order, Father Longford stood at the front arch doors fare welling each and every one. Mother shook his hand and thanked him for the service.

“Don’t thank me Mrs Thompson, I’m here to serve.”

She smiled at that and stepped away, “Ah... Joe Thompson, it’s good to see you again, I trust I’ll see you at youth group again soon, now that the curfew has been lifted.”

“Of course, you will,” mother added before I could get any words out.

“The young man does have a tongue, does he not,” he said without taking his eyes away from me and that lopsided grin never faltering as he held out his hand to me. I didn’t notice it right off but when I held his hand tight, I saw it. The black and gold ring on his finger. Our eyes locked. He squeezed hard, I wanted to pull my hand away, something was wrong, his hand felt wrong, it felt cold.

The hill leading down off Edward Street was steep and more precarious when wet, but the bike held fast to the wet bitumen until I reached Lou Street and quickly rode beneath the wooden sign that proclaimed it was the Peacehaven Show Grounds.

The annual agricultural show was due to start, and the side show people were already showing up. Trucks carrying dodgem cars and the octopus ride were parked up with an assortment of other small vehicles. They carried entertainment to excite and amaze screaming children and of course take their money. Three men were standing near the trucks smoking but paid me little attention as I rode past.

I followed the road that led through the show grounds. It wound past a large pile of logs that had been placed there for the wood chopping show. In between the pavilions that held the produce for display and the sheds that held the poultry I went. The road followed the edge of the arena that would soon be filled with show jumping horses and cattle being judged. Then I cut through the stables that help pigs and goats for judging and through a small gate at the Southern side of the show grounds that led into a corridor dividing the show grounds from the neighboring farm.

I followed the corridor until it stopped at Coby Creek. This was a popular swimming hole for the locals and was mostly secluded from watching eyes. It was a deep pool of water, spring fed from further upstream. On the western side was a mass of boulders that lent out over the edge of the pool. The pool was deep, you could dive into it without fear of hitting the bottom. In the summer Sarah and I spent a lot of time swimming there, and this was where I asked Sarah to meet me.

I reached the end of the corridor, on either side of the fences were signs that read, ‘DO NOT ENTER,’ they were mostly ignored. The rocks spread back some thirty feet from the pool. I stopped on the rocks and parked my bike. Sarah’s red Huffman was parked on the edge of the rocks. Her cloths and towel lay beside the bike.

I stood on the edge of the rocky outcrop, there was no sign of her. I striped down to my boxers and dived in. I hit the water in a less than perfect fashion. I went down deep, the water was too murky to see far and when my body demanded oxygen, I pushed myself back to the surface.

Still no sign of her, ‘Sarah... Sarah?’ I called.

I felt the two hands, they grasped my head firmly, driving me under the water before I could react. My mouth instantly filled with water, I struggled to right myself, my vision blurred with murky water. I surfaced, righted myself and wiped the water from my eyes and there was Sarah laughing wholeheartedly at me. Her laughter suddenly paused, on her face a look of concern, I must have had a shocked look on my face because her face became expressionless.

I turned from her pretending to be madder than I was. But the giggle crawling up my rib cage giving me away. And there we were, floating on the water, laughing at each other as if without a care in the world.

We swam for what seemed hours, then sunbathed on the rocks. Sarah was wearing a dark blue swimsuit, which displayed the freckles along the pale parts of her skin. Her red hair was tied back with a matching band. She took the band out and shook her hair like a wet dog. We Laid there, on the rocks, the sun felt good on our skin. We stared up at the blue sky saying nothing to each other. Then.

"Well buddy... what is it?" she asked.

"It's nothing," I replied

"You didn't bring me out here to tell me nothing buddy, whatever it is I'm guessing it's important."

"I've done something stupid," I finally spat out.

"That doesn't sound like you," she said, I looked across at a sly grin and I couldn't help but grin back, not because how lovely she looked laying there but because she was laying there. In the summer sun her red hair draping across her chest looked golden. Beneath her hair her breasts rose and fell with every breath. Her freckles faded below her neck giving way to very pale skin above her breast line. Laying there on that rock, in that summer sun, I loved her.

"Do you remember the kids at school talking about how Mrs Watson used to scream out during the night."

"Yes... and I also remember Tim daring you to go there, please tell me you didn't?"

"I did."

"Why would you do that?" she said rising up onto her elbow and looking at me. "It's just a poor old lady and she's dying, she wouldn't even realize she's even doing it," I could see the disappointment in her eyes.

"I know, it was stupid alright, and I swear I'll never do anything like that again."

"If no one caught you, no harm done I suppose."

"It's what happened after that Sarah, while I was there, someone else came."

"Who was it?"

"When they went in the house, I followed, I wanted to see. They went in her room, but I couldn't see who it was, I couldn't get close enough for fear of being caught."

I think she could see I was scared, she looked at me worriedly, "what were they doing?"

"Whispers... that's all I could hear and all I could see were two hands holding her head down, whispering in her ear. On the hand was a ring, I could see it clearly. She saw me and screamed, and I ran."

"Did the other person see you?"

"I don't think so, but that's not it, it's the ring, I saw it again this morning. It's the ring Father Longford wears. I got a good look at it this morning when he shook my hand. It was his black car parked outside of the post office. No one else in Peacehaven has a car like it."

"I've seen it too," she added, I was surprised when she said that. "It was late, very hot, I couldn't sleep so I sat on the veranda to cool off in the breeze and I saw the car go past. Not drive past like a normal car but glide past as if it was looking for something."

"I've been watching it from home, I see it when it leaves each night and when it returns. I've got an idea... I mean if you want to help?" I asked.

'Sure buddy... what is it?'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was around ten o'clock when I first caught a glimpse of Sarah in a streetlight off William Street. She wore dark cloths as I instructed. When she reached the end of the col-de-sac on the southern end of King Street she found me sitting on the edge of the gutter. She stopped on the gravel, kicked back her bike stand with her left foot and dismounted.

"Anything happened yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, you sure took your time though."

"I couldn't take the reflectors off my bike with dad at home, he would want to know what I was up to. So... what do we do now? What if he doesn't leave?" she asked.

"I don't know, we just have to wait and see," and that's what we did. We sat, we waited, together in the dark. In the distant west the sky rumbled, a storm brewed, giving off an impressive lightning show.

The impending storm brought the insect life of Peacehaven into full chorus. The sound filled the night. The houses on King Street sat silent. The only sign of life was the porch lights that dotted them. The insects were drawn to them in increasing swarms. At that moment it felt as if Sarah and I were the only ones in the world and that would have been ok by me.

"Dad's sending me away you know," she suddenly said.

"Away... where?" I asked.

"I overheard him talking to my aunt in Brisbane, he wants me to go live with her, he's already looking at collages."

"Because of what's happening here?"

"Of course, he's worried you know, it's starting to eat away at him. He thinks I'll be safer there."

"He's right you know."

"You want me to move away then?" she asked.

I was just about to say no, when the sound of a roller door opening came from the church. We both walked out onto the bitumen to see the church better. The head lights shone out across the empty yard as the valiant edged out onto the driveway.

We mounted our bikes and waited in anticipation. "We follow as best we can, keep a lot of distance between us ok," I instructed Sarah.

"I hear you," she replied, I could sense the nervousness flowing through her and to be honest I felt just about the same, but we had to know. I reached across and touched her shoulder, "We'll be alright, just keep a safe distance," she met my eyes in the darkness and I hoped I was right.

The Valiant entered the intersection of King and William. The streetlights lit up the car in all its detail. High above the car a cloud of insects swarmed the light oblivious to all else but their own pre planned destiny. A low rumble of thunder followed by a large finger of lightning came from the west, "Go!" I told Sarah.

I pushed down hard on my bike peddles to reach the intersection before we lost sight of the car. We reached it just as it was nearing the bottom of the hill. Insects smacked into my face. Glancing over my shoulder I saw Sarah close behind.

"We must reach Main Street before we lose him," I called.

The valiant entered Main Street. We could see it by the line of streetlights that bordered the sidewalk and shops. I peddled hard even though we were descending a hill. We reached the bottom. I heard Sarah's bike on the loose gravel covering the intersection.

It had already passed Victoria Street and was passing the post office as we entered Main street and headed North. My hunch that he would stop at the post office was wrong. We passed the post office which was in darkness except for a neon sign that proclaimed the post office was closed. The valiant slowed at Hartwig Street and took the turn.

"Come on Sarah," I called over my shoulder.

"You said the post office."

I was wrong. The valiant had some other purpose that night. We reached Hartwig Street. The valiant passed John Street. The streetlights were sparser in this area of Peacehaven. Each intersection had only one light and in the dark the valiant was a dark shape with horrible burning lights for eyes.

We passed John Street. The approaching storm made its presence known with a loud clap of thunder bellowing out high above us. Nicholas Street met John Street in a wide arch then followed the boundary of the Lions Park, reconnecting further along with John Street.

We saw the car slow to a stop and pull off the road. I knew the house. It was a small

brick house that was owned by the Stanford Brick Company. There was a number of them along Nicholas Street. They were built mostly to house the workers families because Mr Stanford wanted the company to be seen as a family friendly company and for the most part it was.

When the company was in the height of its glory, the kilns were burning day and night. It was a valuable asset to Peacehaven, it being the largest employer. It attracted a lot of good hard working families to town and it treated them well. It donated a lot of money to the community. They even sponsored the junior cricket team each summer and then there was the company picnic. It was a tradition that everybody looked forward to. Actually, it was more of a feast than a picnic.

The Peacehaven sports park was converged on for the event. The whole town was filled with the aroma of lambs and pigs cooking on spits. Tables were placed in a giant circle in the center of the sports oval that ran along Main Street. lights suspended from poles were placed around the oval. Food was delivered to the tables by way of two men carrying large trays and beer and wine flowed freely.

It was the one day of the year people tended to leave their faith at home. When the feast was over people danced till the early hours of the morning. Children weren't normally allowed to attend but there was always a way to sneak in without being seen to taste all the foods.

The valiant parked. I signalled for Sarah to enter the Lions Park. In the center of the park was play equipment. We parked our bikes there and crept back to where Nicholas Street bordered the park and to where the valiant was parked in front of house number 38.

We crouched and ran, heavy raindrops slapping our faces, lightning light up the sky revealing our position. We hurried on. We reached the line of bottle brush trees that lined the edge of the park. Past the trees was a plain wire fence. We crouched in the shadows cast by the trees and watched. The valiant door opened, and a figure stepped out.

It moved slowly as if overly confident of its concealment from seeing eyes. He approached the front door, knocked several times before the door opened. The light above the door was insufficient to see clearly. A woman answered the door. They spoke briefly then stepped inside and the door closed behind them.

"You know who lives there right?" I asked Sarah.

"Susan Nelsons Parents, and I'm sure he's not there to offer spiritual comfort."

"Let's get closer," I said already crawling through the fence. Sarah followed; we made our way across the road. We reached where the valiant was parked and crouched behind it. The wind began to pick up with the approaching storm followed by heavier raindrops hitting the valiant's black paint with tiny pings.

"Touch it," I told her.

Without hesitation she placed both hands on the driver's side door. Almost instantly she pulled them away again, she studied her hands, "It can't be, can it?" she asked, even in the dark I could make out the look of amazement on her face. She put her hands back on the car again, softly this time, "It's a hot night and the car is cold, icy cold, "that's not normal Joe."

"Come on," I said leaving the valiant and making my way towards the house.

"Joe, I don't like this," she called after me, her voice trembling lightly.

"Neither do I, but we have to see, come on!" she followed hesitantly, we approached the front door. I tried the door handle; it did not budge. I looked back at Sarah, "Do you lock a door when you have visitors?"

"Maybe," she replied in a whisper, she had her arms wrapped around herself as she looked behind us as if expecting someone to come out of the night and surprise us.

"Maybe not."

The rain came down hard. Above our heads the steady trickle of water could be heard in the guttering. We circled around the house, the house had no fencing and very little in the way of gardens except for a line of conifers growing along the southern side of the house. We made our way towards the back between the trees and the building.

We passed windows, each one as dark and as empty as the next. Each window was covered with venison blinds. Seeing in would be difficult even if the blinds were open. We came to the rear of the house. A large water tank was set at the end of the conifers blocking our way. We rounded it as the rain came down in a relentless torrent.

Sarah grabbed onto my arm, "We can't go back now," I said.

"No... look," she pointed to a window at the rear of the house. Light was shining out. The window had blinds as well. We edged our way closer and looked. The faintest of cracks between the blinds allowed me to see in. It was a bedroom, a bedroom for a married couple. There was a dresser in one corner, atop the dresser was an oval mirror. On the dresser lady's jewelry and brushes of various types. Beside the dresser was a hat rack with ladies and men's hats hanging precariously.

On the opposite side of the room was a large wardrobe. Two pairs of slippers sat neatly on either side of the bed. It would have looked like a normal bedroom, if not for the two people laying there, side by side.

Mrs Nelson lay in a body length night gown. Her hair had been neatly brushed and from the looks would normally hang way down past her shoulders. Mr Nelson was dressed in stripped pajamas, his hair neatly combed, and brown moustache neatly trimmed.

The bed had not been pulled back in readiness for sleep even though they were dressed for it. It didn't look right, they looked as if they had been laid out there, laid out like on a morticians table awaiting autopsy. I beckoned Sarah to look. She had to stretch herself to see though the bottom blinds.

"Are they dead?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

We were soaked though, the rain kept coming down, disrupted by the occasional bolt of lightning. A thick film of water covered the window making it harder to see. I had to stop and wipe the water from my eyes. Sarah wacked me gently. I put my eyes back to the window. The bedroom door was open, and Father Longford was in the room.

Without pause he walked to Mrs Nelsons side, lent over, and with both hands pulled her head to one side. He gently brushed her hair away from her ear.

Placed a hand on her forehead, the other gently under her chin and held her like he was going to resuscitate her. He placed his lips against her ear as if about to kiss his sweetheart goodnight. His lips moved; her eyes suddenly opened but still appeared lost to everything that was happening to her. A smile spread across her blank face. A dreamy smile. A happy smile as if she had remembered something she had long forgotten.

We both stood silent, the pouring rain was unrelenting. Sarah would agree afterwards the movement of his lips were mesmerizing. Whatever he whispered to her, it was the gentle movements of his lips, like waves on a deserted island, gently and constantly caressing the delicate sands.

Whispers, that's what they were. Even without hearing, we were drawn to them. He was telling her something she wanted to hear, it made her happy, it was more important than anything she had ever known. It seemed she was in a place she wanted to be, and she would never want to come back.

He stopped; her look of euphoria faded. With his hand, he gently closed her eyes, then rolled her head back so again she looked asleep. He rose back to his feet and walked towards the window. I heard Sarah emit a light gasp even in the storm. His eyes were black, like looking into bottomless holes. His face was lifeless. His features merely painted on to resemble something that once was Father Longford.

He circled the bed and when the same lost smile appeared on Mr Nelsons face we heard the rottweiler growl behind us. We heard its heavy steps in the muddy ground, slow and deliberate. A lightning flash lit the night. It was at the end of the yard. It was pushing its way through a hole in the fence. The wire netting emitted a shape twang as the last of the dog squeezed through.

"What now Joe?" Sarah asked

"It's time to go."

"We'll never outrun it!"

"We don't have a choice. It can only see us with the lightning and with the rain it can't smell us. When I say to run, run."

It was already making its way up the yard but wasn't charging. "Let's go," I instructed Sarah. We left the window making our way around the water tank. Another lightning flash lit the yard. It looked as if the dog was searching for us then saw his target against the tank and charged.

The night faded back to black in an instant. "Run!" I called to Sarah. I kept her in front of me, knowing she wasn't fast on her feet. "Stay in the shadows," I said, I glanced over my shoulder as we rounded the water tank, the blinds were open, Father Longford was standing in the window.

The conifers slapped us in the face like wet prickly hands. We reached the front of the house. I was expecting Longford to come out of the night and sweep us away, but he didn't. We sprinted across the front yard staying in the shadows as best we could. We reached the bitumen. The rottweiler reached the front yard.

Like a ghostly mist the bitumen surface was releasing its stored up heat from the hot day. We passed the road, slid through the wire fence. We saw the dog reach the limit of

the yard and step out onto the road. We crouched beneath the hedge of bottle brushes, almost invisible in the rain and shadows.

Lightning came again. The dog halted on the bitumen. We saw him scanning the surrounds, seeking us. We crouched there in the mud and the darkness, breathless but daring not to breath. With each flash the dog searched for us, plumes of steam puffing from its mouth. Lightning flashed again; it was gone.

We made our way back across the lion's park where we left our bikes. We rode our bikes back to Sarah's place. The rain was easing, a few stars appeared between parting clouds. In front of Sarah's place, in the middle of the road, we sat on our bikes. I think neither of us knew what to say and I wasn't surprised when eventually Sarah said, "We have to go back."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the bright light of day number 38 Hodgson street blended in with all the others. A modest brick house on a street as normal as any other in Peacehaven. This was the workers part of town. Where the labourers and their families lived. They were the ones that maned the kilns. I heard Father once say that they were the backbone of the factory, with a short career time.

A concrete footpath started at the guttering. To the right was a white mailbox with the number 38 in big black numbers. Painted below that, 'The Nelsons' was added in a bright red and by the looks painted by a more then shaky hand. The workers at the brick factory we're, for the most part, very transient. So, no houses on that street had gardens or picket fences to help them stand out from the next. When a family moved in, they simply wrote their name on the mailbox.

I met Sarah that morning in the playground across from number 38 Hogson Street. We sat on a picnic table underneath a large tori alana tree growing in the center of the park. We watched Mr Nelson leave for work. Wearing the distinctive blue overalls, they made the workers wear. We waited. No one else left the house.

We left our bikes underneath the tree. A group of young mothers and children arrived at the park to use the play equipment. We crawled through the wire fence and stopped in the middle of the bitumen road. The valiant was long gone. Its tracks washed away in the rain with all other evidence that Father Longford had ever been here. Sarah was still a little shaken but determined.

We stood in the middle of the road looking for signs of the dog, when none came, we walked in. We approached the door hesitantly. The door was made of heavy oak timber with a round circle of colored glass at shoulder height built into it. The glass was too dense to see through.

I gave Sarah an uneasy look, then knocked hard on the door. Almost instantly a dog barked from within the house, "Pete... stop that right now," a lady's voice called out. The door opened, Sarah and I both backed away a little.

Mrs Nelson appeared in the doorway. She was wearing an apron and appeared to be covered in flour. Her usually well maintained chestnut hair was adrift across her face. She

was struggling to hold the rottweiler by its collar, “well hello there!” she said with a bright smile and a strained look in her eyes from struggling with the big dog.

She wasn’t a very big lady, slender is what you might call her, so it wasn’t surprising when the dog broke loose of her grip and lunged towards us with saliva dripping from its mouth. We braced ourselves for the dog’s impact but was met with a slobbering tongue and wet paws.

Mrs Nelson rushed quickly to the dog, grabbing it by its collar again, “Don’t be afraid, he really is harmless, he’s usually tied up around the back, but the storm last night spooked him, and he broke from his chain. He slept inside with us most of last night,” she said dragging the dog back through the door and shutting it behind him.

She let out a big sigh of relief as she brushed a few loose chestnut hairs from her face, “now that problems fixed, what can I do for you two?” she asked, placing her hands on her hips, with her head tilted sideways in a questioning manner.

“Well Mrs Nelson... we’ve just come around to speak with Susan,” I said fast, “is she home.”

“Susan?” she replied, an honest look of bewilderment pushed away the questioning look in her eyes.

“Yes, we just need to speak with her for a few minutes,” I said and now that I tell you that, I feel sure I could have thought up a better lie.

“I’m sorry, I’m not following, who’s Susan?” she replied. The worst part about those words was not the fact Sarah and myself had known who Susan and her parents were for years, it was the genuine look on her face.

Mr Nelson was a labourer supervisor. With that came special privileges, they usually payed no rent and were payed more than the normal labourers, that being the discernable difference. Also, they were good Cristian people, I saw them regularly at church. They would normally sit up in the back pews and for the most part keep to themselves.

“Your daughter... Susan?” Sarah asked before another word could get out of my mouth.

“Oh my...” she said, a look of sadness crept across her face, “How I wish you were right, but God chose not to bless Mr Nelson and I with children, I’m sorry, but your mistaken, I don’t have a daughter.”

I was about to question her further when I felt Sarah grab my hand. “That’s ok Mrs Nelson, I think maybe we have the wrong house,” she turned dragging me along, “Let’s go.”

We walked back along the path and out onto the road. Mrs Nelson followed and stopped by the mailbox, “You know I don’t have a daughter, don’t you?” she called after us.

We crawled back through the wire fence. I glanced back at Mrs Nelson, I could see the tears, “She’s crying,” I told Sarah.

“She’s certain she doesn’t have a daughter, why?” she asked, questioning herself more than me as I struggled to keep up with her.

We reached our bikes and mounted. "What now?" I asked.

'Come on,' she said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was ten o'clock when we reached the post office. We left our bikes at the side of the building and walked up onto the sidewalk. The summer sun had already heated the day to an uncomfortable temperature. The air was thick and humid. To the west, far off thunder heads held promises of more rain.

There were displays placed on the sidewalk, underneath the shopfront eave. Small garden ornaments sat at the far end, a number of roosters of different colours and an assortment of concrete frogs. A clothes rack held displays of summer sarongs that guaranteed they were hand died. And next to the red mailbox sat a box of lady's cotton scarves.

We approached the front door as Mrs Gleeson, who along with her husband, owned Peacehaven Motors. It was a small mechanic shop that was on the corner of Main and Hartwig Streets. We stepped through the door; perfume struck our senses. Doted in the post office were burning incense sticks. I liked the sandalwood fragrance, it felt warm and inviting.

The post office counter lay dead ahead. Mr Watson was serving. Mr Rogers, he ran the local fire station, was dressed in his dark blue fireman uniform and engaged in a heavy conversation about fire practice. Fire practice was always on a Thursday. Around seven o'clock the fire bell would ring, husbands, fathers and sons would scramble to the firehouse.

We ducked off to our right, pretending to look though the shelves of gifts that were on display. Sarah became engrossed in a shelf of tiny miniature gnomes. Each one was going about its own daily business, in their own little lives that only they could possibly know about.

One was fishing, others were carrying garden tools of various kinds. One was leaning on a shovel with a pipe in its mouth. It was the one that was holding a bunch of flowers with the goofiest expression on his face. I still have it; it now lives in a box buried in my shed somewhere after I removed the furniture from the house. That was the gnome Sarah scooped off the shelf and gave to me.

"Here, buy this!" she whispered.

"What... why would I buy this?" I asked.

"We need a reason to approach the counter."

"Right," I replied looking over the shelf top as Mr Rodgers was saying goodbye. We waited till the firemen left the post office, then Sarah gave me a gentle nudge to approach the counter. Mr Watson stood watching us making our way toward him.

"Help you two?"

Sarah grabbed the gnome from out of my hand, "Joe would like to buy me this, please."

"Birthday?" he asked looking at me.

"Huh..." was all that came out.

"No," Sarah quickly replied, "he was just saying it would remind him of us when I go to college."

"Oh, that's very nice of you young man," he said, then bent over behind the counter and came up with a small brown paper bag with thin hessian straps. He placed the gnome inside and handed it to Sarah. "That will be two dollars please."

"I was very sorry to hear about your wife," Sarah suddenly said as I handed over the money.

Mr Watson looked over the rim of his glass's "That's very kind of you young lady for saying, this place just isn't the same without her, that's for sure," his eyes then looked distant as if memories had resurfaced.

"And the twins, has there been any news?"

"Twins... I'm sorry," his eye's cleared and focused back on Sarah.

"Your two daughters?"

"No, I'm sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Let's go Joe," Sarah said already turning to leave, Mr Watson looked at me a puzzled expression on his face, I shrugged at him and followed. I found Sarah already on her bike.

"What was that?" I asked, Sarah looked deep in thought.

"Whatever he was telling them, it's taken away their memories, but how?"

"Taken their memories, is that even possible?"

"I don't know and yet we both saw it."

"Why does no one else see it?" I asked.

"Because they don't know to look, he silences them before questions are asked. He takes the children, for whatever reason, then erases the parent's memories so they never existed."

"How do you erase a whole towns memory."

"It's probably not as hard as you think, to brain wash a small town full of small minded people, many of which live only to go to church. I don't know. What are we going to do Joe?"

"I don't know either," and I honestly didn't, I was still absorbing what I knew so far but there was a lot more to come, "Isn't your father home this morning?"

"I had better be there when he gets home, bye Joe," she said, leaving me sitting there on my bike. I rode home with my mind weighing heavily. It was just so incredible. This didn't happen in real life, this was not one of my stories, or a movie, this was Peacehaven, the town I had spent all my life in, all the people I knew and cared about lived here. Whatever it was that had come to call Peacehaven home had come here with a terrible intention and that night it fully intended to come home to me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The weather did not disappoint. A storm hit early that night with more lightning than I had seen that summer. Mother had gone to bed complaining of a headache. I sat by my bedroom window watching for the valiant to leave the church. It never moved an inch and by eleven o'clock sleep was pulling hard at my eyes. I gave up and went to bed.

Sometime after midnight the storm must have eased and our house fell into silence, because I woke when I heard the front door being opened. Even from my room I could hear Mother's voice. She was talking to someone; the other voice was muffled. The door closed. Boards creaked under heavy steps, even on the carpeted stairs. Mother's door opened and closed.

I grabbed a handful of bed cloths, I was ready to throw it back, race down the hall, throw Mother's door open and confront whatever I found there. Before I could the doorknob to my room began to turn. I lay still, in the darkness it would look as if I slept. The door opened fully; Father Longford stood there staring at me.

Panic suddenly filled my stomach. It rose up into my chest and despite the storm cooling off the night air a cold sweat seeped from my skin. I tried to control my breathing, which proved a difficult thing to do when your heart is damn near beating out of your chest. He stepped into my room and walked straight to my bed. I braced myself. One hand came down hard on my forehead the other pulled my jaw open.

I felt the coldness seeping into my head. That face, even in the darkness I knew every wrinkle of it. It was distorted with rage. His lips were peeled back into a snarl. He brought his face down close to mine. I could smell his breath, it smelt sweet like candy. Each breath covered my face and it was overpowering.

"You followed us, you saw us," he said bringing his face down till it nearly touched mine, so close I could see the whites of his eyes and the small dark pupils darting backwards and forwards as he spoke.

His anger was consuming him. Then I saw the black film creep across his eyeballs. They were gone in an instant, transformed into black empty holes. His mouth opened. I saw his skin move. Something was crawling underneath it, from his hair line, from his neck and from his cheek. He opened his mouth until I was sure his jaw would break. I saw it. Like a giant worm, it slithered from the back of his throat, across his tongue, out his mouth. Black like tar. Reaching for me, it craved me, it wanted me.

"Joe Thompson? if you can hear me, you'd better pick up," George's voice erupted into my

room from the two way. The yellow fluorescent light, came from my bedside table, reflecting off the worm. The worm stopped, quivered, it was feeling pain. It retracted back into Father Longford's mouth. The blackness in his eyes shimmered. He stood, walked backwards towards the door as if in rewind like rewinding an old cassette tape.

He stood up. His arms hung limply at his side. He moved backward toward the stairs dragging his feet along the carpet. His head hung from his neck with his chin resting on his chest. He moved as if paralyzed with invisible hands controlling him. He passed through the door. I sat up and listened to him descending the staircase. My body was shaking all over. I heard the front door close with a bang.

I throw back the bed cloths, scooped up the two way and raced to the window. Almost at the top end of William Street I saw it. It was in the shadows trying to avoid the streetlight. It looked like a pool of water. Dark and murky slithering towards the church. I watched it until I lost sight of it in the night. Even from my bedroom window I could feel the hatred.

"Joe Thompson, pick up."

I ignored George. I raced to mothers' room. I sat next to her on her bed. She was sleeping peacefully. Relief washed over me. I sat for a moment watching her. She was breathing heavily. "Mother," I whispered softly, "Mother." She began to stir.

"Allen?" she said sitting up. She hadn't called me that for a long time and she never called me that again.

"Do you miss Father and Henry?" I asked.

"Every day," she replied.

That was all I needed to hear.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

To say George was angry would have surely been an understatement. Sarah and I sat at opposite sides of his kitchen table. His big hands were wrapped around a hot cup of coffee. I was watching him, wondering how long he would be able to hold his hands there. Even for a hot day steam rose from the hot liquid and disappeared. His eyes focused on the contents of the cup with a fierce intensity. A vein that ran from his red hair and disappeared halfway down his forehead pulsed as we said what we had to say.

We told him about what I saw at the Watson's house. We told him about the black valiant and our suspicions that Father Longford was involved. He took that without saying much. Actually, he never said anything. We then told him about going to the Nelsons house and everything we had seen there. He took that with a few nods and facial expressions and no other real words. We then told him about our suspicions about his involvement in the disappearances of the children.

"Oh boy," he finally said, letting go of the coffee cup. He rose to his feet, the wooden chair scratching along the polished wooden floor. He approached the kitchen sink. Standing there quietly he stared out through the lace curtain that was hung from a white rod

covering the kitchen window. From the kitchen window you could see a hedge of orange trees bordering the property from Barkers street. They were heavy with flowers. The perfume drifted through into the kitchen with every puff of wind.

"Oh boy...oh boy...oh boy," he kept saying to himself.

I looked to Sarah, she raised her shoulders slightly in an attempt to say, she wasn't really sure what would come next. Even though George was one of the most levelheaded and open minded people I had ever met, this was a pretty far stretch to push anyone.

He took a deep breath, sighed heavily then sat back down, "Ok..." he said, lifted the coffee cup to his mouth and took a deep gulp and I was surprised the coffee did not burn his throat all the way down to his stomach.

"George I..." I began and was cut off by his raised hand telling me to stop.

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, alright, let's just say that right off. I have always been able to trust you two kids, let's say that also. But to tell me Father Longford, who by the way, just happens to be the best and most loved priest this town has ever seen and is somehow responsible for four kid's disappearances, that in itself, is pushing the boundaries just a little, don't you think?"

"He was in my bedroom last night," I added.

"Yes... you said that."

"He's also been in the Watsons and Nelsons homes and these are just the ones we know about."

"You said that too," he paused, took a moment to think, "look Joe, he's a priest, these are the homes of the missing kids, maybe he's just there to comfort them, you know, doing his job."

"Doing his job?" I said, my voice rose a little, "That wasn't comfort coming out of his mouth."

"Yes, what were the black things you said you saw."

"They looked like... I don't know what they were, but they looked like big worms," I tried to explain but only managed to make it sound more unbelievable.

"Worms, of course," he replied slumping back into his chair.

He lent forward toward me, "Your mother, as you well know is going through one hell of a time, first she lost her husband, then she lost her son, so God forbid she would benefit from a little spiritual guidance."

"Spiritual guidance, at midnight?"

"Look Joe," his angry look fading to a look of concern. "I've known your family for a long time, everything that's happened, it's gotta be hurting you. You know..." he waved his hands in the air looking for the right words, "Playing with your mind. It was dark, you were tired, maybe you just thought you saw what you saw."

"Sarah saw him too, not the worms but Longford, he was in the Nelson's house,

in their bedroom.”

“If Joe says...” Sarah started shifting slightly in her seat and fixed her gaze firmly on her father, “A worm like thing or whatever you want to call it, came out of Longford’s mouth and tried to get into Joe’s, that’s probably a cause for concern.”

Sarah threw me an agreeable smile and pushed her glasses back onto her nose with her index finger. “We’re just asking you to check it out dad, that’s all. Something wrong is happening in Peacehaven and Joe and I are the only ones who can see it.”

“I’ll do some digging he said and if I find nothing, that’s the end of it alright, I never want to hear it again agreed?”

In the end we agreed. That was more than we could’ve expected of George. I’m not really sure if he did it because he believed any of the things we told him that day. But I do know, the seed that Longford had planted in his mind, the seed that was beginning to sprout, would wither and die once we told him to look for what he knew wouldn’t be there.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Then there was Jenny O’Shea. Her only crimes in her short life were being innocent and trusting. In her time of need she put her faith in Father Longford. She was in her fifteenth year and a member of a carnival group. She had called the carnival circuit her home since she was born. Her mother and father worked the side show ally. Her job was the lucky clowns, you know the one, those crazy clown heads that roll their head from side to side. You drop a small white ball down their throat and more times than not you won a trinket not worth the effort you put in to win it.

She was very pretty. With long black hair and deep green eyes. She always wore ankle length dresses with boots. I think maybe she was trying to cover herself up. Because she attracted a lot of attention from the male kind and most of it was from her uncle who owned the carnival. Her parents weren’t wealthy, I guess very few side show people were, but they scratched together a living from the generosity of his brother.

So, when her uncle payed visits to her van, she did little to resist for fear of turning him against her parents. Visiting far off lands and exotic places, she always dreamed of them. To grow wings and fly away, somewhere too far for anyone else to ever find her. Someplace where she would be happy. Her parents would be so proud of her. That was how she coped with the abuse. When he visited, she flew away, she was happy far away, until it was over.

The group had been camped in Peacehaven for a week waiting for the show circuit to start. The ground was wet. The storms seemed never ending. The group members were restless. Setting up in the mud made for more difficult work. And on that night, it was no different. A storm rolled in from the west hammering the show ground with rain. Few people ventured from their trailers at night, fearful of the lightning.

Jenny sat in her trailer; she loved the sound of the rain on the trailers tin roof. Her father

had bought her the trailer when she turned fourteen. Thinking it was time she had her own space. She loved antiques. Particularly small wooden boxes. She called them dream boxes. You could put special objects inside dream boxes. The wood would soak up the essence of those objects. Objects that were loved and cherished and together they would become a dream.

She collected them from small antique stores and garage sales in the different towns they stopped at. Her other love was crocheting. She had made a giant bed cover for the double bed that was built at the rear of the van. She made a habit of picking wildflowers every time they stopped and placed them around the van. I think she just wanted to be surrounded by beautiful things that would always make her happy, to mask the unhappiness that lived inside her.

The rain was deafening on the roof of the van, but Jenny didn't mind. She sat in a small wooden rocking chair that she brought cheap at a garage sale because one leg was broken. Her father fixed it the best he could, but it still gave a little bump when she rocks backwards but she loved it anyway. She had showered in the showground amenities and gotten back to her van before being soaked again and slipped into her night gown.

She was humming to herself as she rocked gently in the rocking chair, so lost in her crocheting she couldn't have noticed her uncle approaching the van. Three loud bangs came on the van door. She jumped in surprise. One needle fell from her hand. She grasped the rocking chair arms and held on tight.

"Who is it?" she called, knowing full well who was behind the door. He hadn't visited since they arrived in Peacehaven.

"You gunna let me in or what?" her uncle called. His voice slurred.

She began to shake. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest. She wouldn't do it. She wouldn't let him in. She grabbed both arms of that old rocking chair and forced herself to stay put.

"You'll let me in if you know what's good for your parents," those words dug deep into her, she gripped that chair harder until her fingernails were digging into the wood. She will win this time. He couldn't get in and she wouldn't let him in. She heard the key slid into the keyhole of the van door.

The van door flew open with a gust of wind and rain. Her uncle stepped through the door. Wearing overalls that were stained with grease, with all buttons but two undone revealing a large belly of overindulgence. He wore no shoes revealing long yellowed toenails. He stood in the doorway allowing the rain to pour in over her possessions. In his left hand he carried a half finished bottle of rum.

He lifted the bottle and took a large swallow. He let off a muffle cough as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Even with his drinking experience it burnt deep into his throat.

"Well look at this, you've set this place up real nice," he said, he sat the rum bottle down on her dresser, water quickly ran off the glass pooling around the bottle. He worked his long hair through his hands, pulling the water from it and flicking it back behind his head.

Jenny sat frozen in her rocking chair, breathing heavily through clenched teeth. Her eyes followed him as he approached her collection of boxes. He picked one up and opened it,

"What's this?" he asked, "Dried flowers, pretty rocks... oh and look at this, an old penny," he fished out the penny, studied it for a moment then slipped it into the front pocket of his overalls, "I think I'll hang onto this."

He stepped over to Jenny, lent down and placed his hands over hers. She flinched, letting out a small gasp. He brought his face down to hers. The stench of rum hit her face. "Get out," she said, she wanted to sound defiant and courageous but the words barely escaping her mouth and it sounded as soft as a mouse. She sounds scared and shaky despite her resistance and he liked it.

A grin spread across his face, "Your father gave me a key, just for safe keeping," his hands let go of hers then clasping around her throat. He was strong, she was not. He lifted her from the floor. His hands choking her as her feet desperately searched for the floor. "Your mine and always will be girl," he said then threw her back into the rocking chair.

She hit the chair hard. The damaged leg gave way crumbling beneath her. Her breath was driven from her body. She tried to get up, but his body weight pinned her to the floor. If only she could scream someone might hear her through the storm. She breathed in deeply to cry out. A greasy hand cupped across her mouth, "Don't you make a sound, you know by know how this works."

He grabbed her dressing gown, ripping it from her shoulder, revealing her left breast. That's when Jenny closed her eyes and began to wish herself away. Away to her safe place, a place all she had to do was run and jump to get there. She would fly, to where no one would ever hurt her again. She saw herself running, through that field. The summer flowers trampled under her feet; butterflies smack her in her face with their gentle wings. She ran with all her might. She could see the edge of the field. It fell away into oblivion. She reached the edge.

She leaped.

For a moment she soared higher than she had ever been, and she felt freer than she had ever felt in her short life. No one could ever hurt her again. Then she fell. The brightness of the summer field faded. She fell. The darkness engulfed her.

She screamed. Her eyes opened as his hand was working its way up her inner thigh. She struggled. She searched with her hands, for something, anything. Her hand came upon the crotcheting needle. She clasped it hard in her left hand and drove it as hard as her tiring strength would allow.

The needle entered his right eye dead center of his pupil. He sat up releasing his weight from her. Her hand still held firm to the needle. His eyeball caught on the crotcheting hook, pulling the eyeball free of its socket with a wet popping sound. She staggered to her feet dropping the needle. He knelt on his knees. A look of shock etched on his face. One eye staring up at her. The other dangling like a pengelane from its socket with the needle stuck through it like a cocktail olive.

In that moment she found a triumph. She had fought back and won, even though it would cost her dearly. She turned and ran through the van door. With bare feet she ran into the storm. Her uncles screams of rage drowned out by the rain. She ran through the maze of trailers, stopping at her parents. She could see them, they sat talking, happy, she wouldn't destroy that. She ran.

She passed under the show ground gates out onto Lou Street. The bitumen hurt her bare feet. The road rose up to a hill. The darkness overwhelmed her. Lightning flashed, lighting up the giant gum trees that grew in the nearby paddock. The pain in her feet became too much. She stepped off the road and walked in the gutter. The water ran deep, pulling hard at her ankles.

She reached Albert street. The road was not surfaced. Her feet slid on the black soil with each step. Lightning pieced the night again high above her. Horses in the nearby paddock watched her pass by then raced off into the night with heavy hoofs that were quickly drowned out in the storm. She could see a streetlight ahead. She pushed on. She reached Barker Street.

She remembered this road. The park was to her right. Light poles that gave off little light were placed along the center of the park following the footpath. She wrapped her arms around her shivering body. She began to cry. She stood and surveyed her surroundings. The children's swings squeaked against the wind. The gum tree branches reached out over the path casting shadows against the lights like giant fingers.

She listened. She thought she heard her uncle in the night, he was coming, he would come roaring out of the darkness, his thirst for revenge would be unquenchable. No, she wouldn't allow that, she ran again. She knew where she had to go. She reached the end of the footpath that opened up onto King Street. Without stopping and ignoring the blood coming from her bruised and cut feet she ran through the storm.

She thought the light looked like a light from heaven. Put there to guide her to where she will finally be safe. The light was attached to the pinnacle of the Anglican church roof. Its job to cast light on the holy cross that sat atop the church roof. She stopped, with her heart beating hard and struggling to catch her breath she approached the church door. She put weight on the wooden door. It opened.

Like I said, I felt a lot of sorrow for Jenny. After she ran off into the darkness and her uncle realized he would never catch her, he began to scream. Blood curdling screams. He was heard above the storm. People left their trailers to see the commotion. And didn't he look a sight, with his eyeball hanging out and Jenny's crocheting needle stuck right through it.

When he saw Jenny's parents coming towards him, he screamed more, "Look what that little bitch of yours has done to me!" through the rain and blood seeping down his face.

"Jenny wouldn't," her mother retorted, "She's a good girl."

"Wouldn't she?" he screamed in reply, "Look in her van, she's been stealing from all of us, I came to confront her, she attacked me and ran off into the night, see for yourself."

They did see for themselves. They saw exactly what her uncle wanted them to see. After Jenny had ran off into the darkness he returned to his trailer. When he was there, he pulled the small fridge away from the trailer wall, he lifted the lid off of a secret compartment built into the floor. He build it there himself so none of the filth that worked for him could ever find it.

He returned to her trailer and stuffed money in every one of her dream box's. Jenny's parents had little choice to believe what they saw and not what their hearts told them. A meeting was held, and it was decided the best thing to do was to carry on without Jenny. No

report was ever lodged with the police. No one ever searched for her. When the show was over, they packed up and continued on with the season leaving Peacehaven and poor Jenny behind.

To this day I am the only one who knows where Jenny is and that makes it that much more difficult to bare because when I'm gone all memory of her will be gone forever.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sarah was very determined when she wanted to be. I do believe it was the excitement of the unknown, that intrigued her. Something not right had decided to call Peacehaven home and nothing would stop her from knowing what. She decided the storm was the perfect opportunity to get close enough to the Anglican Church. She didn't mind the rain.

The church stood in darkness, except for the light beneath the cross on the church pinnacle. She stood on the foot path leading up to the main entrance. The stained glass windows reflected each lightning strike. She crossed the lawn to the priest's residence. It was a small cottage situated at the northern side of the church. The grass squelching beneath her boots, the ground struggling to absorb the excess water. She stepped up onto the veranda. She tried the door, it was locked.

At the end of the veranda were a set of sash windows. She placed her hands on the wooden frame and pushed upwards hard. it didn't budge. She tried the next, it opened with a light snap. In her pocket she carried a small torch. She turned it on and held it in her teeth. She pushed the window all the way up. A small brass hook held it from falling. She crawled in.

The building was a modest chamber board cottage. Recently renovated to house one person. The room she entered was a living room. It held bookshelves, a television and in the far corner sat a recliner with a small cedar coffee table placed in the center of the room.

She left the living room through a door that opened up onto the kitchen. It was spotlessly clean. Everything in the kitchen was brand new. None of the appliances looked as if they had ever been used. The fridge was bare of food and not even switched on. The oven looked as if it had never been heated and the small kitchen table held not one single crumb.

She opened a door at the rear of the kitchen that was the bathroom. It also looked unused. She returned to the living room finding the door to the bedroom. The bed was made. The pillows were puffed, the bedclothes looked crisp. She passed her hand over the bed cloths. There was not a wrinkle on them as if no one had ever slept there. She opened the wardrobe that stood in the corner of the room.

The wardrobe contained what she would expect to find in a priest's room. Five black suits neatly pressed with a slight hint of lavender hanging from wooden clothes hangers. The suits were most likely put there by one of the committee members.

Underneath the suits were two pairs of black shoes that someone had spent a lot of time polishing and if not for the fact she knew Father Longford lived here she would be certain no one had ever been in the cottage. She made her way back to the window, killed the

torch and crawled back out the window. The rain hammered her again. She wiped the water from her face as she made her way around the church, searching the grounds as she went for watching eyes.

She crept around the side of the church, underneath the arched windows that looked out onto the grounds. The rear of the church opened up onto a large grassed allotment that was circled by a pailing fence painted white. She crossed it to the rear of the cottage where the carport was built. At the front was a roller door, she tried to open it, it opened slightly until the large lock placed at the bottom latched on. She walked around the side of the carport. A set of louver windows were built into the wall.

She shone the torch through the louver glass. The light penetrated the darkness inside the carport then reflected off the valiant parked inside. She had to get in.

She walked to the rear of the yard, searched in the mud until she found a rock that fitted firmly in her hand. She waited, she heard the low rumble of thunder come across the sky and when it reached the end of its tether and exploded across the sky, she brought the rock down hard. The glass shattered, showering the concrete floor with glass shards.

She reached in and opened the louvers. Carefully she removed two more. She brushed away the broken glass from the window frame then crawled through and lowered herself gently onto the concrete floor. Broken glass crunched underfoot. She searched the carport, it was empty, except for the valiant. She stood next to it. She held out her hand and reluctantly she touched it.

Immediately the cold seeped into her shin. She quickly pulled her hand away.

She tried the front passenger side door, it was unlocked. She opened it. She pointed the flashlight inside. It was empty. She closed it and walked to the rear of the valiant. She felt above the number plate and found the boot latch. It opened quickly, bouncing at the top when it reached the limit of its spring. She stepped back in surprise. Something was in the boot or something that used to be someone. It held the shape of a man, but had no facial features, finger or toes.

It was like a naked blob of jelly that your mother might bring to the table. It was Longford, she was sure of it. His skin was translucent. She held the torch closer, beneath the skin she could see the black worms moving, the whole shape was a mass of black worms. She pushed the torch closer. The worms slithered away from the light.

She moved the light along the shape. They slithered to avoid it. The light was hurting them. The shape moved; a white fluid oozed from its skin. It was adapting to protect itself from the light. She panicked. She pushed the bonnet back down until she heard it click shut. She hurried to the window, crawled back through out into the storm. Without hesitation she hurried around the church, up the path leading to the road and disappeared into the shadows.

She heard footsteps approaching. She withdrew deeper into the shadows waiting for Longford to emerge from the church looking for her, he never came. A barefooted girl in a night gown ran out of the darkness. The gown barely covering her. Her left breast was uncovered, bouncing with each step. She was beautiful. Her pale skin was ambient against the lightning. Her black hair covered her face. She looked frightened. Sarah watched as she approached the church door and disappeared inside.

Sarah emerged from the shadows. She walked back across the road, along the path and

entered the church door. Gently she pushed the door closed behind her. The girl was kneeling at the end of the isle. She could hear her praying. She edged closer until she was behind the girl, "Are you alright?" Sarah asked.

Jenny stood and turned. Sarah flicked the flashlight on. A look of terror spread across her face. Her green eyes were edged with redness from crying. Loose strands of black hair covered her wet face. Sarah reached out and gently brushed them away. Her breast shook with every quivering breath. Sarah gathered up what remained of her night gown and pulled it over her exposed breast, "Don't be afraid," Sarah told her.

"I'm not afraid anymore," she said to Sarah, she didn't understand what she meant by that, "That's what he wants me to be and I won't, not anymore."

Sarah had no idea what she was talking about, but she knew Longford would be coming and she couldn't leave Jenny there, "Listen... we have to get out of here ok, right now!"

"But it's safe here, I'll stay here and be safe."

Sarah held her hand toward her, "No, it's not safe here anymore, trust me. I want you to come with me. My father's a policeman, we can go to him, he'll keep you safe," she tried to convince her.

Jenny looked at her hand. Her sobs stopped. She reached out and took Sarah's hand. Sarah gave her a gentle tug to get her to her feet. "Good, it's going to be alright, we just need to get away from the church."

Sarah pulled Jenny close to her. With an arm around her waist she turned her toward the door. Even in the darkness and even though the shape standing in front of the door barely resembled a man, Sarah knew it was Longford and it was too late to run.

It's not something anyone is ever really meant to know but I would like to think her last thoughts on this world were of me, because I know when my time winds down, my thoughts will be of her. I can only imagine they felt some kind of love for each other as they held each other tight.

The terror would have been agonizing to see those black worms breaking through the skin of that blob and the skin collapsing to the ground. Hundreds of them crawling up the isle toward them. Black as tar, black as night, cold as death crawling over their skin.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the end it only took two words to destroy a life. Two simple words driven home with all the force of a steam train. To send it in a direction that could only have been decided by a higher power than that which caused it. The storm had continued till the early hours of the morning. I watched for the black valiant till around eleven o'clock, till sleep overcome me.

The two way hissed to life, "Joe?" George spoke.

I snatched it off my bedside table and hit the return button before he could repeat it, "Yes..." I replied.

"Sarah's missing," the words drove away what fuzziness sleep still held over me.

"What do you mean missing?" I asked.

"I mean missing, is she with you?" he asked back, sounding frantic.

"I haven't seen her since yesterday."

"Her bed hasn't been slept in; it looks as if she snuck out during the night. Do you know where she would have gone."

My mind was spinning. My first thought was she'd gone to Longford. She had become obsessed since we went to the Nelson's. If she'd gone on her own, she may have been caught. She may even be, no, I didn't want to think of that, so I asked, "Did you look into what we talked about?"

The two way was silent for a moment, then "Be at my place in two hours, I'm going to speak with Father Longford."

I did what he said. I arrived at his place by half past ten that morning to find him sitting on his porch. Beside him sat two shovels. A cigarette hung from his lips. He took a deep drag. I sat down beside him. He was scared. The cigarette shook between his index and middle finger. I watched a lump of ash fall from it and land on his boot.

"Go on, you might as well say it."

"Say what?" I looked at him unsure.

He looked up at the sky as if transfixed by it, "A lot of storms we've been getting this summer, it's kind of odd, looks like another one brewing. Do you remember it being dry before Langford turned up?"

I didn't really think much about it at that time, but he was right, you could damn near set your watch by them. They rolled in like clockwork. I turned to him, "You spoke to Longford then?"

"I did, I asked him a lot of questions. He gave me a lot of answers. The funny thing is that I've never really noticed it before, but."

"Noticed what?"

"He kind of has a way of making you believe everything he tells you, even if you know he's shitting gin in your pocket. You just wouldn't see it if you didn't know to look for it. You two put the idea in my head and I could see it right off, he was lying right to my face, with that damn lop sided grin of his, I just wanted to knock it off his face."

"He has Sarah, doesn't he?"

"I don't know, if he does then it's already too late. If I report it, there will be another search and another investigation that will turn up nothing and do you know why?" he asked.

"Because everyone loves Father Longford," I replied, he nodded in agreement. "It's because of this place, people are so lost in their religious convictions that they can't see what's right in front of them. It's like once you see it, you wonder how you could ever miss it."

"The other children and Henry, do you think he has them to?"

"Uh huh... all this started the day he drove into town."

"The black valiant," I said, "It's a part of whatever he is, it's one piece of the many that make the whole."

He looked at me for the first time since I arrived, "What?"

"The worms, their small, but they make the whole. They all need each other. Making the whole and the whole needs the valiant, mostly I think to contain it, to protect it, like a normal earth worm hates the light and cannot dry out."

"Right," he said looking at me unsurely.

"Do you know where they are George?" I asked.

"I have a hunch."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We traveled to Green Acea Cemetery. During the trip we barely exchanged a word. We were both lost in our own grief. We arrived around midday and parked the patrol car at the green iron gates. George retrieved the two shovels from the boot. The day was hot, a line of sweat had worked its way down the back of his uniform. A storm was brewing on the western horizon.

We approached the gates, sat the shovels down and George lit another cigarette. That done he retrieved a ring of keys from his pocket and selected one large bronze key. He unlocked the gate and pushed it in.

"Why are we here?" I asked as I followed behind.

"It was Longford who insisted on the fake funerals."

"You're going to dig one up?"

"Like I said, it's just a hunch, and not me... we."

He handed me a shovel and the anxiety that was coursing through Georges body hit me like a tidal wave. We reached the four graves. They still looked freshly dug. We stood over Susan Nelsons empty grave. The white head stones reflected the bright sunshine into my eyes, I flinched. George looked at me with welled tears in his eyes. He wipes them away, "The ground will still be soft, let's get it done, it's the only place she can be."

I drove the shovel down hard, lifted out a load of dirt and discarded it. George nodded, unbuttoned his police jacket, sat in atop the headstone and began shoveling. The ground shoveled easily enough. The rocks had been removed when the hole was dug. Without the rocks the earth would compact more with time and look more pleasing to visitors.

We worked hard. George stopped frequently to light a cigarette. By the time a shovel struck wood we had a large pile of dirt sitting grave side and George had smoked nearly a packet of cigarettes. We cleared the remainder of the dirt away and threw the shovels onto the ground beside the grave.

"We have to get it out of the hole," he said then scrambling up the side of the grave and disappearing over the edge. I lent against the wall of the grave catching my breath. The fresh earth smell filled my senses. I heard the patrol boot open, then close. "Here take this," he said throwing down a length of rope, "Pass it through the handles then jump out."

I wove the rope along the side of the coffin, poking it through the handles, then repeated on the opposite side. I threw both ends up to George and jumped out. We stood on either side of the hole and lifted the coffin out. It felt light, like I expected but my heart hammered in my chest just the same and anxiety crept up my spine.

We dragged it away from the grave, then George reached across the coffin, grasped me by my shirt front and pulled me closer, "If my daughters in this box, were putting that bastard in it and burying him so deep no one will ever find him, are we clear on the Joe?" he asked me, his lip was trembling, the anger was raw in his eyes.

The coffin lid had small brass screws that resembled small keys locking the lid to the box. Once all eight were removed we stood up. Our eyes met, "I'll do it," I told him, I grasped the lid firmly and inhaled deeply then slid the coffin lid back.

George fell to his knees crying into his open hands. At that moment my heart died forever. I felt numb, grief, like I'd never known. Sarah's body was right there in the coffin, her red hair was still tied back. Her blue eyes were sunken back into their sockets. Her arms were wrapped around another, a body I didn't recognize. Beneath them, the rightful owner of the grave lay. Susan Nelsons corpse, as if it had been laying here for a hundred years.

George approached the coffin, taking big gasping breaths "What's happened to them?" he asked.

At that moment I had no answers for him. My world was suddenly empty. Were ever Sarah was now I wanted to be with her. I wanted to take it all back. To never have got Sarah involved in this. I reached inside and gently touched her red hair.

I said out loud, but mostly to myself, "They look like old corn husks, dehydrated like a fly after a spider has finished it's meal. Dried out. That's why no one noticed, they wouldn't have weighed anything at all. He kills them and places them here where no one would ever think to look."

At the back of the cemetery, beneath a wattle tree, we dug a new grave, just for Sarah. We placed her body there, in a place only George and I will ever know about. We removed Susan Nelson and the body that I would soon discover to be Jenny from the coffin and placed them back into the marked grave and reburied them. That done we carried the coffin to a cleared spot in the far eastern side of the cemetery and dug one last grave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We had a plan. It seemed simple enough. Although there is good reason why they say something about even the best laid plans going wrong, but we were determined to give it a good shot or die trying. We both owed the dead kids that much.

All day we planned and gathered equipment. We travelled to Toowoomba and purchased lengths of plywood and a nail gun. Back in Peacehaven we went to the state emergency shed, George just happened to have a key and borrowed all the flood lights we could find.

We then went to the brick factory. George said he knew someone who worked there that owed him a few favors. Anyway, when he returned to me waiting in the patrol car, he was caring two pairs of the thickest gloves I had ever seen. He explained their special gloves used to handle red hot bricks, if needs be.

We packed the lights, shovels and other tools into the patrol car. The wood was stacked neatly in Georges trailer, the trailer we had another special job for. With those jobs done we waited. George said I had better stay away from home until we're done. So, I spent the day with him waiting for night to come.

The day dragged by painfully. George smoked and drank beers. We talked a lot, about Sarah mostly. Henry also filled my thoughts. I fell asleep on Georges couch. I sleep uneasily, I don't know why but Jack, my pet crow, plagued my dreams again. I was running through a paddock, the paddock was dry, the trees were dead.

I ran, tripping and stumbling. The crow pursued me everywhere I went. It swooped at me time and time again, each time I stumbled. But with each swoop the crow grew bigger and bigger until it was so big it picked me up in its beak and swallowed me whole. I remember falling down its throat. Through that darkness, screaming and falling, then something was shaking me.

It was Georges hand, I opened my eyes, he was standing over me. He was freshly showered and shaved. He was wearing a clean uniform, he smelled heavily of soap, "Time to go," he said then walked out onto the veranda.

I got up; my head was spinning lightly. The anticipated storm had already blocked out the evening stars. A rumble of thunder came from overhead. We both got into the patrol car and traveled to Green Acea Cemetery to retrieve the coffin. We found it where we had left it and loaded it onto the trailer.

We parked at the bottom of the col de sac at the south end of king Street, where Sarah and I had waited before. It was eight o'clock. It was half past eleven when the church carport opened and the valiant left for its nightly tour of Peacehaven. When it was safely gone, we approached in the patrol car and parked at the side of the church.

"We have to work fast," George said getting out of the car.

First, we carried in the coffin and sat it before the alter. Then we nailed the ply sheets over every window and just to be sure George nailed the side door shut with well-placed nails. The lights took a little more time to runout leads and keep them hidden from sight. We placed them at the back of the pews to angle all the light toward the coffin.

We hid the patrol car back along King Street and walked back to the church. Before we left, George pulled his service gun from its holster and doubled checked it in the car light and returned it to it holster. He reached in and killed the cabin light then threw me an approving nod.

We returned to the church. We left the front doors wide open. Using one of the bibles placed on the pews, he wedged it under the lid of the coffin. With the preparations done I placed myself in front of the coffin to wait. George positioned himself in the shadows out

of site to anyone from the isle. We then waited.

It was two o'clock when we saw the lights shine through the church doors as the valiant came up William street. We listened; the garage door opened. It closed. I looked in the direction George placed himself, I couldn't see him but felt his stare. The front door to the cottage opened. He tried the side door to the church. The nails held it firm. We waited. We heard footsteps on the path leading up to the church main entrance.

"What are you doing here boy?" he asked from the doorway.

"I've brought my brother home, home to the house of God," I called back.

"What are you talking about?"

"My brother Henry, the first one you murdered."

He laughed lightly, turning his head to the left, then to the right looking across the shadows, "Your brother Henry, did you know he called for you in his last moments?"

My fists clenched. I fought back the anger, "Why do you take the children?" I asked, his attention returned to me.

"Children taste the best to us, when they are afraid, they taste even better."

"How will I taste?" I threw at him, "I'm not afraid of you." He began to come forward but halted and gazed around in the shadows again as if unsure, "What are you waiting for, are you afraid?"

Those last words angered him, he stepped closer. George switched on the flood lights. The bright light made him stumble further forwards. His attention on me was broken, I jumped up and ran to the end of the pews, along the wall and met George where he stood with his gun drawn.

"Father James Longford, or whoever you really are!"

"Sergeant?" he asked, holding his hand up against the light, "Thank God you're here, Joe Thompson has broken into the church."

"I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Henry Thompson, Katy Watson, Paula Watson, Susan Nelson and Sarah Hillman." George fired the gun. The bullet struck him in the stomach. He stood with both hands covering the wound. A look of realization spread across his face that quickly turned to rage. George fired again, hitting him in his chest. He covered the hole with his right hand.

"Your running out of hands Longford!"

"Stop... wait," I said to George, holding out my hands so he wouldn't fire again.

"What?" George asked.

"I have to ask,"

"Ask what?"

I looked at Longford, "When you whisper to them, what do you tell them, to make them forget?"

A smile showed through behind the sneer, "What do I tell them? Why...I simply tell them the truth."

"What is the truth?" I asked.

"The truth is that nothing you do will ever matter. I tell them their lives are no more than an angel's midsummers dream. I tell them what's on the other side, the memory lose is merely them letting themselves go. Their so desperate to be over there and not here."

"Over where?" George asked.

"Where everything you ever wanted can be yours. Where your wife," he looked hard at George and that lop sided grin returned, "Will never die." He looked across at me and I swear the grin grew wider, "That girl you loved in high school will be yours forever. I tell them and they see it and they choose of their own free will to let go and give in."

"It means something else though doesn't it," I threw back at him, "You have to give up everything you have here, you have to die."

"He means heaven," George looked across at me, "Sarah's in heaven?"

"No, not heaven. He lies to them. He just means dead. When he's taken what he wants from them, he leaves them dead." George turned and fired, hitting him where his heart would have been if he'd had a heart. The look of absolute hatred melted from his face like a burning candle. His skin became translucent. His facial features melted into one clear tissue. His arms fell to his sides, we saw the worms. They were animating the fake skin that formed the shape of Father Longford.

The lights were burning them, the skin was melting, building into small pools at its feet. The skin ruptured. The worms spilt out, wriggling as they burned. Somehow, they sensed the coffin was their only escape from their torment. They crawled towards it.

"Put these on," George said rushing towards me carrying the gloves and two spotlights, "Use these to round up what worms don't go into the coffin."

The worms slithered toward the coffin like a wave of tar, desperate to get away from the light. Up the side of the white surface they went and spilled over the edge into the darkness inside the coffin. We hurried between the pews, pointing the torch towards each loose worm that we found, they bent and slithered their slimy bodies to avoid the light. I picked one up using the gloves. It wriggled in my hand trying to get away. I struggled to hold it. It felt soft beneath the glove but when it moved it felt like raw muscle.

George ran towards the coffin as the last worm disappeared into the darkness. We slammed the lid down hard. I crouched on top to hold the lid shut while George searched the church again but found none. George brought the flood lights in closer placing them around the coffin. One full turn of the eight brass keys and the coffin was locked forever.

The time was three o'clock in the morning. We removed the ply from the windows and the nails from the door. That done we packed it all back into the patrol car. We found a mop and bucket at the rear of the church and cleaned up what was left of Longford the best we could and carried the coffin out to the trailer.

Once again, we traveled to Green Acea Cemetery. By half past five that morning the coffin

containing the worms and the memory of Father Longford was buried under six feet of good Peacehaven earth and it has been there ever since. We made that ground look as if nothing had ever been put there.

As for the valiant, it's been right here all the time. George brought a shipping container; he didn't want to get in the car himself, so we pushed it in and placed it at the back of our shed. By itself I believe it's harmless but together as I had told George before, it made the whole.

Sometimes, I unlock that container and go in there. It still feels cold to the touch and it still frightens me.

I can only imagine the well-deserved hell Longford has endured in that coffin. I'm sure if he does dream, he dreams of revenge and often. I try not to think of them, but no one has complete control of their thoughts. Those worms slithering around in a pool of pure hatred. A hatred so strong that I do believe it seeped through the walls of that coffin and contaminated the earth around it. I look at it each year I walk out there and each year that circle gets bigger. It's dead ground now, almost black like oil had spilt out of someone's engine.

We both stood at the iron gates of Green Acea Cemetery. George pulled the gates shut and turned the key, it locked with a dull thunk. He turned and looked at me. "Here," he said, handing me the brass key from the cemetery gates. "There are only two, the other one I'll destroy."

I watched him turn and walk away, I called after him, "What do we do now?"

He turned and stared back into the cemetery, "My wife and daughter are in there. I can't spend what time I've got left here." He turned back to me, "You need to decide what you want to do with the time you've been given Joe, because I don't think it will ever really be over, he's in there but he's not gone."

That was the last time I ever spoke with Sergeant George Hillman. He was true to his word. He quit his job as a policeman, he sold his house and move on. He never told anyone where he went, and I do believe that was the right choice. But I sure do miss him and if he is still alive, I hope he found some kind of peace.

And that's about the end of my story, about everything I have to say and when I leave Peacehaven I'm going to leave this letter sitting right here on my kitchen table for everyone to see. I think that will be enough. I think I have given enough, and Sarah and Henry would be happy with that and I'm sure they would tell me to stop punishing myself.

I do hope whoever may read this takes it seriously and doesn't just dismiss it. I know it does leave behind a lot more questions than I've probably been able to answer. I could even imagine someone would ask how do I know so much about those kids deaths when I wasn't even there.

I'll tell you how, I know because I've been there every night since. Every night when I close my eyes. It doesn't matter that I've surrounded myself in light he can still find me and show me. He gets to me in my dreams; he shows me everything. Everything he did to everyone of Peacehaven.

It would be comforting to think we had stopped him and to think it was only Peacehaven

he touched. It would be comforting in some ways to think that. Of course, it wasn't. He shows me other children, from other towns I've never seen or heard of before. Some children and some towns from a time even before mine.

As for myself I've finally decided to take Georges advice. Mother has been dead for a long time now and there is little holding me to Peacehaven anymore. I've spent the best part of my life living in fear and regret. I have a desire to be free of it all. So like George, I'm also going to put a for sale sign on this old house and leave Peacehaven forever.

I feel that's for the best. Because George was right, as hard as we tried we didn't get them all and it will never be over. Because in the end all it took was one worm to escape. One worm to find a hole made by a well-placed heel, from a lady's shoe, at a Sunday morning service. A heel that would push a knot away from a board in a church floor and leave a hole. A hole big enough for one worm to get through and one worm to never stop watching me.

-THE END-

If you enjoyed reading this book please leave a star rating and send some feedback via the author's obooko.com download page.