

CHAPTER ONE

The Visitor, Twelve Years Later

Job swung the cab door shut, and turned to look at the house.

Just two minutes behind schedule. Or twelve years behind, as they had discovered only two weeks ago. They had still arrived in time, optimistically speaking, although time was tricky to measure under these circumstances. How does one avoid a disaster that's both already happened and threatening to happen in the alarmingly near future?

Blame could not be put on the Rectory, whose members had kept a tireless watch for more than a decade. While Mab had failed to prevent the tragedy, she had also given her life to protect her apprentice, who now stood there in front of the house, three minutes late. And regardless of how this whole terrifying mess continued to swirl in orbit around her, Renna was as faultless now as she had been at age four.

And so, Job knew calamity would be neither invoked nor averted by their delay of three minutes and thirty seconds. They were ready (... almost). Twelve years had allowed them to say farewell to most awkward aspects of their adolescence. Gone was the youthful chubbiness from their cheeks, and the timidity from their powder-blue eyes. They had grown tall, slimmed down, and found a striking fashion sense in a suave pressed shirt and vest combo. Their towheaded curls had been tamed into a shorter fauxhawk style. Their poise and movements were like a cat who was proud, but not self-aware enough to be considered vain. Yes, the maturity of their early twenties suited Job quite well.

They couldn't see much of the property beyond the verdantly gregarious hedges that pressed forward to greet them. Tiger lilies and azaleas bowed their colorful heads, but pushed in so close

there was barely room to move down the path that lead to the house. Job made their way through and found themselves under an arched trellis creeping with hearty vines, fresh from the night rain. The leaves framed a sign hung on the pinnacle of the arch; the red paint was faded and peeling, and the gold trim was thoroughly tarnished. But the carved letters remained legible, proudly bearing the name of the house that lay beyond: INGLENOOK.

After the trellis, the lawn and garden were truly allowed to let loose their inhibitions. Grass grew freely and mingled with all manner of weed and wildflower. The property's most matriarchal trees had seen a great many of their seedlings sprout up unmolested by lawncare, now as skinny, awkward saplings early in their "treenage" years.

It was difficult to differentiate sitting junk from lawn art, but perhaps the line was intentionally blurred. An extended family of flea-market-fare garden gnomes had been quite industrious with the territory, co-opting cardboard boxes, planters, fruit crates and the better half of a recliner to create an impressive faerie paramilitary compound. On the other side of the walkway, the overturned hull of a rowboat was the roof of a nursery for the year's youngest and most fragile outdoor plants. In the expansive backyard, Job could make out a massive tree whose branches were hung with rope ladders, tire swings, hammocks and more ornamental fare, in a strange parody of a Christmas tree that had sprung up in a junkyard.

These and countless more attractions of the outside property were still dwarfed by the presence of the house itself. If given a minute to stare at it (something difficult to avoid for first-time callers), one could see that it was actually a patchwork of two or more different houses, connected by seam and mortar, joint and jib, plank and prayer. The front porch framed not just one but three front doors, without much indication as to where each actually led. From the walkway, Job could also see a door on the second floor that led straight out onto the sloping roof

(though, for obvious safety reasons, a bright yellow sign had been tacked to the outdoor side: “CAUTION, DO NOT OPEN!”). Even higher up, another door gave access to half a widow’s walk, as though the construction was halted when her husband made it back from sea after all.

Despite the building’s thoroughly baffling design, it all somehow came together to create a presence of harmony and goodwill, much like the thoroughly baffling family that lived within it. Every inch of the place served a purpose and received wear and tear and repair throughout many long years. Anyone who had grown up knowing the presence of a good home would recognize it in Inglenook.

Job was up the front steps and now found themselves facing the ordeal of the three doors. They could hear sounds coming from behind all three, and not one of them sounded particularly peaceful or inviting. Which would give them the best chance of response: the dulcet sounds of a poorly-tuned cello playing Chopin with the tempo of a speed metal enthusiast? The din of water, dishes and children screaming about the floor being made of “soap-lava”? Or maybe just risk the door that sounded like it was guarded by Cerberus, whose heads were in the midst of a heated argument?

Thankfully, the choice was made for Job before they had the courage to touch a knob. The door on the left opened and out burst the creatures responsible for all the canine consternation; two dogs and an eight-year-old boy wearing naught but boxer shorts and swimming goggles rushed one after another off the porch and deep into the lawn’s tall grass, continuing their loud and lively discourse.

Following them outside was a man in his early forties, looking like he was enjoying the end of a long Sunday morning (despite it currently being nine a.m. on a Tuesday). He wore a

stained college sweatshirt, painter's jeans and an easy smile surrounded by stubble. He offered up his non-coffee cup hand to Job.

“Hey, glad you could make it. Sorry ‘bout the derby-gate welcome, Alec remembered where he buried something in the backyard, and he just had to go and show the dogs.” The two of them looked out at the swaying grasses far off in the backyard, indicating the locations of the wild creatures.

“No problem. You’re Mr. Austine?” Job asked him.

“Please, that’s what the telemarketers call me. It’s Kyle. And you’re Job, right? Like the guy in one of the Bible stories I read a long time ago.”

Job granted him a weak smile. “That’s the one ...”

Kyle didn’t seem to be fazed by any social restraint on Job’s part. “Well, come on in, don’t mind our mess, we can talk in the new kitchen.”

Job had to mind the mess a little bit, else it would have tripped them up in seconds. The mudroom contained plenty of mud from the dozens of shoes piled haphazardly on the floor, some of which had made bold steps into the narrow entrance hall just beyond. A staircase led upwards off to their left; the railing was painted to look as if a long-bodied dragon curled around it, rising into the ceiling and floor above.

Another child stared down at Job from the point where the ceiling and stairs met; as Job followed Kyle into another room on their journey to the kitchen, they saw the kid crawl down the stairs headfirst to get a better view. Job couldn’t help but wonder if the caretakers of children and pets in this house made any distinction between the two groups.

From up ahead, Kyle remarked, “That one’s Narin, came from Cambodia last year. Once he takes a liking to you he’ll be quite friendly. And don’t worry, they don’t all act like animals; they just share a lot of space with ‘em.”

He laughed and Job managed a weak “ha.”

Job and Kyle entered the new kitchen, although the “new” part might have been a bit premature, as it seemed to still be in the middle of renovation. Two more children sat at the large central table, most of which was covered by potted plants, books, candles and piles of papers. Another man was busy at the stove; Kyle offered Job a seat on the sawhorse currently acting as a place at the table and then went over to address the cook.

The kids had stopped working on their homework to acknowledge Job. The older girl was just over the cusp of adolescence, and the boy was just before it. To Job’s relief, neither of them seemed inclined to act like animals (in front of a stranger, at least). The girl gave Job a shy smile and the boy stared for a few seconds before returning to his math problems.

The cook approached Job with a plate of breakfast food. He looked around the same age as Kyle, but dressed smartly in business casual beneath the apron. He nodded at Job and put the plate down at their now-designated seat with a sharp tap. “Welcome. Sorry I can’t stay for this, but I’ve got deadlines all day. If you really need me, Kyle, just pull me out of the upstairs office.”

He was almost out the room when Kyle called to him, “At least leave your name with our guest.”

The man wheeled around. “Ah, right. Troy, pleasure.” With the inertia of the same spin, he was headed out the door again.

“Chef Troy, you’ve still got your apron on,” Kyle called to him through a mouthful of bacon.

“Oh—what, well ... forget it, doesn’t hinder my writing,” Troy responded from somewhere on the stairwell.

Kyle handed Job a fork and addressed the kids. “Where’s Renna? Where’s everyone else? Also, introduce yourselves to our guest; this is Mis- ... uh. This is Job.”

Job winced a bit, but was surprised when the girl suddenly leaned forward and cut in on Kyle.

“Hold up, Kyledad, did you even ask for Job’s pronouns?”

Kyle blinked and as he considered the matter. “Oh. Yeah, you’re darn right. I’m sorry about that.” He gave a flustered nod to Job. “So, what pronouns do you go by?” He continued, thanks to a light elbow jab from the girl.

Job gave her an appreciative glance as they answered. “It’s alright, thanks for asking. I use they/them/theirs.”

They all nodded in acknowledgement; Job heard the boy say “just like Sami then” under his breath. The girl introduced herself as Alis (she/her/hers) and the boy as Solomon (he/him/his). Furthermore, Solomon identified himself as a “homer,” a term that eluded Job.

In response to Kyle’s initial question, Alis said, “I think Renna’s still asleep? She was up late finishing all the homework due for today. Derek, Sami and Boot are in the Old Kitchen being godless heathens again, that’s all I know. Oh, also, I’m not a homer.”

Job’s confusion may have shown on their face at that point, and Solomon piped up. “It means that she doesn’t live here; it’s not her home. And like I said, I’m a homer. I get to live

here with the dads and everyone else, which is pretty cool. But I guess having another home is cool too, you know?”

Job nodded. “Um ... yeah, that is cool, I guess.” They didn’t quite know what to say beyond that, so they shoved some eggs into their mouth.

Kyle had replenished his coffee and finished a long sip. “And what are our godless heathens doing in there?”

No one had time to give an answer, as a nearby door burst open and three more kids piled into the room. Their clothes were all soaked, and their hair was matted with suds. The youngest one of the trio leapt forward, a small wiry boy nearly vibrating with energy, and declared in a window-rattling volume,

“FLOOR. IS. SOAP-LAVA!!”

“Thank you, we’re right here Derek!” Alis yelled to him, her hands still over her ears. Derek hooted and turned a cartwheel out of the room. The other two kids remained: one a tall, mousy youth coming up fast on their adolescence, the other a short, sturdy girl with an eyepatch and gap-toothed grin. Both of them had taken notice of the outsider, but Job couldn’t evaluate their expressions yet.

Kyle remained unperturbed by the situation. “Floor is soap-lava, huh? How much lava are we talking about in there?”

Alis sighed and got up, as if on cue. “Come on, Sami, Boot, you know what Troydad’s gonna do if he sees the Old Kitchen’s become a mess ...”

The two soaked kids retreated through the doorway, with Alis hot on their heels. After a moment in the other room, she could be heard exclaiming words befitting of any godless heathen.

Kyle sighed. “Sounds like all hands on deck. Sorry Solomon, but do you think I can get you to go lend a hand for a bit? I also have some grown-up stuff to talk about with Job here.”

Solomon groaned and slapped down his pencil. “Fiiiine, I was getting bored of this homework anyway.”

“That’s the volunteer spirit I like to see!” Kyle said to the boy’s back as Solomon trudged out of the room.

Once the kitchen was finally devoid of children, it felt the proper time address the matter for which Job had come in the first place. They didn’t know quite where to begin, so Kyle started the conversation.

“Sorry ‘bout all that. It’s the way of life around here; each day’s a new show. Most folks on the outside aren’t really used to it, I guess.”

“Not at all. I spent my teenage years in a kind of boarding school within a rectory, so I’ve known my fair share of chaos. And caused it.” Job chuckled genuinely for the first time since they had arrived.

Kyle raised his coffee cup a bit. “Here’s to a healthy childhood, then. Anyhoo, sorry Renna’s not up yet, she knows this is the day you were coming. She’s probably a bit nervous.”

Job nodded. “I completely understand. I hope I’ll be able to alleviate some of her fears when we get the chance to talk.”

“Not sure I’d use the word ‘fear’ to describe that girl. Her recovery’s been a long, hard road, of course, but she’s come out pretty amazing. All fight and no flight, I’d call it.”

Hearing that gave Job a bit of hope for the upcoming meeting. Even so, Job couldn’t keep their practiced smile from being weighed down by a feeling they repressed ... something like guilt?

“That’s excellent to hear. There’s ... there’s a lot to fear in this world. It’s not worth fearing the smaller things.”

There was a moment of silence and Kyle cocked his head a bit, sitting in a pause that Job did not fill with an explanation. Together they let it pass and Kyle raised up his coffee cup.

“Yeah! Here here, I’ll drink to that. If I still had coffee left.”

Their conversation was interrupted again, this time by another adult. A tall, stringy man scuttled into the room, looking as if he hadn’t slept in days. He didn’t register the two humans at the table as he crossed to the refrigerator and reflexively grabbed the condiments that fell out of the overstuffed compartments.

Kyle turned to him. “Ray, are you conscious or are you sleepwalking again?”

Ray turned around, ketchup and relish still in his hands. “Ah. Uh. Sorry, ‘nother all-nighter. Found an amazing online tutorial that might let me finish the suspension system for my monowheel design. Also been in contact with my old team over at MIT, their funding came through and they’ve set up this amazing new lab, once my contract work’s done at the end of the month I’m really thinking about packing up all the parts I’ve got and heading down—”

“Ray,” Kyle interjected with practiced accuracy, “You’re doing that ketchup-toast thing again.”

“Oh.” Ray looked down to see himself spreading the red condiment over a burnt piece of pumpernickel. He sighed. “You know, it’s happened so often I think I’ve actually gotten used to the taste. Plus it’s got as much sugar as jam or peanut butter, so really there’s little difference when it comes to dietary input, I think ...”

Kyle rolled his eyes so Job could see. “Okay, I’m not gonna stop you from being gross. Do you know if Renna’s awake or mobile?”

“I heard her moving about when I went by her room,” said Ray through his chewing. Job’s bile rose a bit as they saw a blob of ketchup stick to the corner of Ray’s mouth.

Kyle went over, rinsed out his cup in the sink and carefully balanced it on top of the other dishes awaiting their washing. “Good. When you go by again can you remind her we’ve got company?”

Ray murmured his assent through a full mouth and retreated from the kitchen, but Kyle verbally caught his sleeve before he could disappear. “Hold up. We have a guest, in case you didn’t see. Job, this is Ray Ruiz. And vice versa.”

Ray nodded, smiled with his cheeks and gave them a fluttering wave that he pulled after him as he exited.

“And that’s the three of us,” continued Kyle. “The only new weirdos you’ll see beyond this point are the kids.”

“So the adults live here as well?” asked Job.

“Well, yes, but all three of us together run the place. As you might guess, we all have different specialties. Together we manage to make a relatively competent adult authority for all these guys. At the moment, we’ve got ... lessee ... Troy said we have eight homers and like nine non-homers. Give or take. Most of ‘em have some kinda special circumstances, of course. Probably wouldn’t be here if they didn’t.”

“If I may ask, is there any deeper distinction between the two groups, beyond what Alis and Solomon explained?”

“For homers, this is their full-time residence until they grow up enough and find other living situations. That might be adoption, guardianship, or even just adulthood in some cases.

Non-homers come here primarily for homeschooling, but many stick around to play with everyone else. Sometimes it's a good refuge from their own home lives."

Job nodded. "It sounds pretty incredible. The three of you can actually manage it all?"

Kyle laughed. "'Manage' is a word for it. We somehow continue to exist day after day, so we must be doing something right. Anyway, Renna's been a homer here for close to a decade, and is now one of our oldest. And like I said, when she first got here she was quite a troubled kiddo. But the years have been good to her. You'll understand when you meet her, I guess. Shall we?"

Kyle stood up, patting his belly and rubbing at a new stain he found on his sweatshirt. Job fell into step behind Kyle as they headed back to the staircase in the front hall. Job was only a couple steps up when they sensed someone behind them; it was the young Cambodian child they knew now as Narin, who was acting far less dodgy.

His dark eyes stared up at Job. "You here for Renna?"

"Uh, yes, I guess I am," replied Job; they were following Kyle up the stairs, and Narin was climbing along after them, still on all fours.

"She's in the Olders room now, y'know. She got to move in 'cuz she's an Older. But she's only sixteen, y'know, an' Kayalee, that was the Older who left, y'know, she was eighteen. Kayalee was, y'know. And now Renna's the second-oldest Older in Inglenook, after Arie, but I don't think he really counts, y'know."

Job did not know, but it seemed Narin was finished telling them about it, leaving Job to wonder why Arie didn't really count. They were on the second floor now, moving through a hallway decorated with all manner of obstacles, including an oversized end table, laundry baskets full of clothes, a fish tank full of books, and a cat tree colonized by groups of tiny potted

plants. Job was glad they were following Kyle's back or they would have already gotten lost. Narin continued to pursue them.

"You look pretty cool, y'know. Your hair and your vest an' stuff. Renna's pretty cool too. But that's because of how she makes weird stuff happen."

Job's attention was snagged. "Weird stuff? What do you mean?"

Narin smirked. "Y'know! Weeeiirrd stuff. Like really, y'know?"

The elongated version had not helped clarify anything for Job. "No, I don't, I don't know, sorry ..."

Narin's pleased expression faded. "Oh. Well, I mean, y'know, like the shapes in the smoke that came out when she burned the pancakes. Or what happened to the grass after she tried to mow the front lawn that one time. Oh, and when Darwin died, that was one of our dogs, y'know, she was really sad and then all those birds came and sat on the trees outside ..."

The chill that had been lingering on the base of Job's spine crawled up to the back of their neck as Narin recalled these events. They wanted to know the details of what the boy was describing, but now was probably not the best time to inquire ...

"But it's okay! Because Renna's a good person anyways, y'know. And look, I'm cool too!"

Narin got up on two legs again and pulled up one leg of his sweatpants, revealing a prosthetic limb, connected just below the knee. He hopped up and down on his other foot as he tried to raise the false one up higher. "See, even when I run into somethin' it doesn't hurt at all, y'know, and I can kick a ball super hard with it! I can even kick stones!"

From up ahead, Kyle called back, "Narin, you know we've talked about how that's not a great idea ..."

Narin shouted forward, “Kyledad, you were the one who showed me how to kick a football like that!”

“Ah. Yeah, I guess I did ...” Kyle’s voice came back sheepishly.

After what seemed like far too much walking for getting around a single floor of a house, the party arrived at a door nestled in the corner of a hallway. The door was a work of transient art, covered mostly in leftover residue from stickers and tape that had been peeled off unsuccessfully over the years. A few still remained, references to pop culture that Job had never really paid attention to at any point. The only thing on the door that made sense to them was the word ‘Olders Room’ scratched directly into the wood. It didn’t sound like anyone was awake behind it, but Kyle went up and knocked on the door without hesitation. “Renna? You alive in there? You have a visitor.”

CHAPTER TWO

Renna's Room

After a few moments, a muffled “Yeah” came through the door to them. Kyle reached for the doorknob. “Then can we en—”

The rest of his sentence was curtailed by Narin, who had skittered forward and pushed the door open enough for him to slip through, and he vanished inside. After a flurry of fumbling noises within the room, Renna's voice returned. “God's sake, Narin, chill for a bit. Y'can come in.”

Kyle pushed the door open the rest of the way, and then stood aside in a gesture to admit Job in first. They felt apprehensive about entering a private room, even when previously invited; Job had always been quite sensitive to matters of propriety and proper decorum. But Job also saw that the unwritten rules of this house were quite different from what they were used to, and figured it would be best to just follow along. So they stepped inside, over the threshold and right into a pile of clothes that was waterfaling off the bed in front of them.

The narrow room formed an L-shape with large windows looking out onto different areas of the yard. A single-file footpath had been cleared between the excessive amounts of stuff packed into the space. Much of this stuff appeared to be art projects in various stages of completion or dissolution—some rested in piles upon the floor, where they slowly became buried treasures, while others clung to the walls with nails and tape. The light that streamed through the windows had to make its way through the colorful forest of translucent baubles hung from the sashes: little windchimes, strands of sea glass and translucent plastic ornaments painted the pale walls in many splotches of skittering color. Although it was crowded and chaotic, everything

seemed to have its precarious place. The objects that lived in here, whether out in the open or buried and forgotten, contributed to the feeling of comfort and sanctuary. It was a well-built nest, Job thought, particularly suiting someone of Mab's lineage.

And then there was the nest-builder herself. Renna was perched in the papasan chair that resided in the corner of the L-bend, her legs curled 'round and tucked underneath a baggy sweatshirt. She had just finished a deep yawn that stretched out her freckles, and was now picking at pieces of paper in her dark, feathery hair. When Job's snowy eyes first met hers, Job felt a curious soul gently poking through their gaze. This girl's connection to Mab was undeniable now; it had been more than a decade since Job had met similar eyes that simmered with patient, charming ponderance.

Kyle squeezed into the room behind them. "Jesus, I can't believe how much stuff is still in here. Job, this is Renna, obviously. Renna, this is Job— they're the one I told you would be coming, remember? Just, uh, here to talk right now, I guess. Lemme grab Narin and we'll be outta your hair. Which could use a brush, by the way."

Kyle was looking around for the child who had vanished into the wilderness of the room. In the moment of quiet, Job heard movement coming from a loft that was hidden away around the corner, which neither they nor Kyle could see from their vantage point near the door.

Renna kipped up and with a spritely leap, grabbed the edge of the loft and pulled her chin up. "Narin, I took all your treasure out of the bed up there. Your stash was becoming bigger than Blackbeard's."

"Not true, y'know!" came a muffled reply. "Still some left up here!" A set of shiny measuring spoons flew into the adults' view and landed on the papasan.

Kyle groaned. "That's where they were. I bet he's still got the grater up there, too."

Renna sighed. “Alright Narin, I’m comin’ up to get you. Get ready.” Narin squealed in anticipation as Renna dropped to the ground for but a moment, and then made another leap for the wall nearby. She found climbing holds on a couple of surprisingly steadfast art projects mounted there, and then dove from sight into the loft.

“Scuse me a bit.” Kyle shuffled past Job to retrieve the measuring spoons, and they had to twist awkwardly to get around each other.

In that small moment, Job’s eyes were drawn to a notebook that lay open upon the topmost layer of clutter on the desk. The artwork must have been done fairly recently, as the pencils that were nestled in the crease between the pages matched the colors of the picture. There was a small yellow bird, circling around in a vast expanse of black. The black had been made as black as could be by grinding the pencil into the paper, so that one might even feel the darkness just by touching the layers of wax. The blackness was roughly triangular, making it seem like an opening into an abyss. Beyond the boundary of the darkness, a field of red lines crosshatched all over the remaining white of the pages. They were long, and jagged, and despite the chaos from which they were made, they all seemed to flow inward, being drawn towards the void. It all felt very ominous. It made one worried for the tiny little bird in the middle of it all, flying around as if it was lost ... Or dying.

Job was so entranced with the picture that they nearly fell onto the bed as Kyle pushed past, carrying Narin over one shoulder. “I’ll let you two alone now, sorry for the trouble,” he said, while Narin grinned and waved from his vantage point.

The door was shut, and then Job and Renna were alone together, in the silent room filled with spiraling glass-light.

CHAPTER TWO, STILL

Renna's Room, Revisited

Renna had returned to her post in the papasan chair. She was observing the visitor in her room, who was currently trying to perch on the edge of her bed. A person of contrasts, she noted. Complementary ones—their curly platinum locks standing out against their dark skin—and conflicting ones—the effort they were currently putting into appearing poised, even as the heavy sag and thick blankets tried to pull them in like a sinkhole.

Renna had also observed them observing her journal shortly before Kyle and Narin's exit. It had been a spontaneous project late the night before, the fleeting image of a dream she had awoken from put to paper. Renna had many dreams, almost every night, and she was not in the habit of recording them, but this one had felt slightly different. She had no ideas as to what it might mean, if anything at all, but a feeling had kept nagging at her, telling her to record it in some way, before it vanished back into her subconscious. The memories of the dream had begun to fade as soon as she put pencil to paper, almost as if it were transferring thought to form. By the time she was finished, she could barely recognize what she drew as what she had dreamt.

She felt like sharing none of this with the stranger in her room, however. Surely they had a Reason for coming to see her, with lots of Relevant Information and perhaps even some Responsibilities. She didn't know, but she guessed. She didn't know, so she was nervous. She wanted them to speak first and get on with it.

And so they did. Job stood up, abandoning their precarious bedside post, and gave Renna their full attention. "I apologize for calling so early in the day, Miss Porter. And for the ... mysterious nature of my visit. But I would like to make it all clear now."

“Sure. As long as you just call me Renna.”

“Ah. Yes. Sorry.” Job ahem-ed a bit. “Renna. I’m afraid I must begin this conversation on a somewhat strange and ... inconceivable topic.”

Renna had no idea where Job was going with this, but her interest was piqued. “Well, conceive away, I guess.”

Job nodded, and then delivered the line they had spent so long preparing. “If someone told you that certain misfortunes were of supernatural, and not coincidental origin ... Would you be inclined to believe them?”

“Sure.”

Renna had been expecting a more complex question than that, and it seemed Job had been expecting a more complex answer.

“Oh. I see. Well, that’s ... convenient then.”

“You expected me to say no, didn’t you?” Renna smirked.

“I tried not to expect anything. But that caught me a bit off-guard, I will admit.” Job gave a small hint of a smile.

Renna’s gaze turned to the sea glass lace of her window. “Ever since I can remember, stuff’s happened to me that felt like more than coincidence. Especially when other people didn’t sound convinced when they tried to tell me it was.”

“Smoke and birds, was it...” said Job in a quiet voice.

Renna nodded. “To name just a few times. It never really scared me, for some reason, but I could tell it scared everyone else, and then I became scared too. I don’t have any control over it ...”

“That is no fault of yours, I can assure you.”

Renna met Job's snowy eyes, seeing for the first time a caring, if cautious, soul within them.

"To go back to the misfortunes I spoke of, yours are not products of unhappy coincidence. You were born with unusual higher energies, which remain within you to this day, and give rise to those strange phenomena when said energies occasionally spiral out of control."

"It sounds like you're saying I'm some sort of, like, supernatural being or summat. An extra-terrestrial? Oh, what about a cryptid?"

"Nothing of that sort, unless you have more secrets that I don't know about."

"Yeah, so, about that." Renna folded her arms and increased the intensity of her stare. "Who told you about all this? Why do you supposedly know so much about my 'supernatural freakishness'?"

"Most of our folk use the term 'Hexing' to describe that 'freakishness.' And I know because I knew the person whom you inherited it from—your paternal grandmother, Mab. Beloved in our communities as a witch with few equals in either wisdom or power. And I was her apprentice, for a few years at least."

"Whoa, wait, what? That's ... that's a lot to take in at once."

Job nodded. "So it is. Like I said, I wish to make it all clear, as much as I can."

"So my grandma was a ... witch, as you call it, and you were her apprentice, meaning you're also a witch, and there's, like, a whole bunch of you in a community?" Renna poked at her fingers as she spoke, visualizing the list of incredible things that had just been revealed.

"Correct. More than a bunch, I would say. There are witches, or more generally, practitioners of magic arts, living all over the country, and the world. They're as diverse as any

group of humans, but we naturally settle into small societies to share knowledge and take care of each other.”

“Alright. That makes sense, I guess. So my, uh, Hexing, as it were, is that some kind of magic then?”

Job gave a light shrug. “It’s not so clear-cut. It has more to do with the energies that we witches tap into to create our magic. Without going into too much theory, people who have a strong affinity for such energies sometimes become a vessel for them, within their own bodies and spirits; Mab was one such person. She had the necessary skill to keep that power in check at all times, so she did not manifest any Hexings outside of her control. However, it seems that the qualities that draw excessive energies to us can be passed on hereditarily. They remained dormant in your father, as far as we know, and then manifested in you, who have no experience with controlling said energies.”

Renna sank back in her chair, her gaze dropping into her cupped hands upon her lap. She had trouble recalling a happy occasion that wasn’t soured by one of her “mishaps.” That one summer campfire with strange patterns glowing in the ash; that time a car cut them off at a traffic light and swerved into the breakdown lane shortly afterwards, all four of its tires expelling air. There were times when she wished she knew why it happened, so maybe she could fix it. But now it just sounded like a curse, bred into her genes, and in her ignorance she had no hope of stopping it. Unless ...

“You can learn to control it, just as your grandmother did,” Job finished her thought for her. “Even with some basic training and energy work, you will be much more prepared to deal with this heavy birthright.”

Renna perked up at this. “That sounds good! So you’ll stay here and teach me then?”

“I can teach you, but it will have to be after we go to the Rectory.”

“The Rectory? Are we going somewhere else?”

“I’m afraid so. This is the main reason I have come to visit you today.”

Renna tried to push back a growing uneasiness. “There’s even more? I feel like I’ve had enough big revelations for one day ...”

“I understand it’s a burden, but I have to ask you to be patient, for the moment. You see ... Renna, perhaps you don’t remember much of your life before you came here, to Inglenook. And you’re likely better off for it.”

Renna nodded. “I know there was a fire, and I lost my family in it. And I’m alive, somehow. Another homer here told me once that all the bad luck I experience was balanced out by the good luck of surviving that one time. I guess it made sense to me, back then ... But does this have to do with my Hexing?”

“The fire was not your fault in any way, I assure you. That night, the blaze was started by a ... being not of our world. A horrible monster, more than a human could ever be.”

Renna squinted at Job while trying to parse out the vague description. “Like ... a demon?”

“That’s a good name for it. Not any pauper’s demon either. This creature is ... old. The words that damned it are likely in a language long forgotten.”

“Huh ... okay ... so, not only are magic and witches a thing, but also demons. Great.”

“You still with me?”

Renna motioned for them to continue.

“That terrible night twelve years ago, once the demon had carried out its attack on your family, it left to continue its evil with your grandmother. I was residing with her at the time, and

I still remember the night clearly. She sent me to safety before it came, preparing to confront it on her own. As I said before, she was an incredibly talented witch, but ... there are few humans that can stand against that kind of unholy strength. Mab did what she could and what had to be done: she lured the demon into a trap and took it out of this world, along with herself. It was the most likely way to stop the creature's rampage."

"So ... My grandma died, along with this crazy demon."

Job had to avert their gaze, and they tried to look past the sea-glass out into the sunny yard beyond.

"If only that had been the end of it ..."

Renna leaned forward. "You have to be kidding me. Is it not dead?"

"For years, the Rectory's network of witches and allied covens have been watchful for any signs of the monster's resurgence. There were some unsettling omens, here and there, but we can't go searching every shadow. A couple months ago, we were able to confirm that the presence we were monitoring was indeed the same as twelve years before— It's regained enough of its strength to be a deadly force once again."

"Okay." Renna was feeling a lot of things right now, but she couldn't tell whether fear or anger had the edge. "So what does that mean now? Why are you here telling me this instead of, like, out there with all your witch buddies trying to take it down?"

"It seems to be biding its time— it may have rematerialized, but it's still weak, and it doesn't like feeling so vulnerable. We've decided to use this precious time to secure you instead. Once it's ready ... it will be the one doing the seeking."

“That’s ominous.” Renna wanted to say more— she could put two and two together easily enough, but by this point fear had brutally silenced anger and was now dragging its icy fingertips across her skin. She gripped at her arms, willing warmth back into them.

“But why me?” Renna couldn’t keep the question in any longer. “Why the hell is this demon thing after me, in particular?”

Job shook their head slowly. “The reasoning of those creatures is beyond human comprehension. I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer for you. We just know it’s after your family, or your bloodline, and as of right now, it doesn’t consider its evil deeds finished.”

Renna tried to reply, but the words caught in her throat and died on her tongue; they felt clammy and tasted sour. She just tried to focus on her breathing.

Job continued, their words carefully measured. “That’s the situation as it currently stands. We don’t know how much time we have left until the demon regains its full power. We want you to be in a safe place at that time. We’ve prepared the Rectory to be that safe place, and it was my task to come here today— to ask you to return there with me.”

“But this is my home.”

“Yes. And we don’t want it to end up like your last one.”

Renna stared at her lap and said nothing more. Job was just part of the background now, as her consciousness retreated within the edges of the papasan chair. There was just her, in her baggy, slept-in sweatshirt, and the few straggling snippets of paper that found their way out of her hair and down onto her stomach. She tried to brush them away, but they clung on as if they desperately wanted to stay, so she let them.

The late-morning light continued to bounce through the sea glass lace on the windows, chasing stray shadows around the room. But once their owner had gone, the glittering ornaments

would no longer have anything to protect. There was some sudden shuffling, and Renna's trance was broken to see Job failing to make a quiet retreat amidst the clutter. They appeared to have been staring at Renna's drawing on the desk again. They regained their composure in an instant, and gave her their last instructions.

“I know it's too short, but we'll be leaving tomorrow morning. Prepare however you can.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Visitor, Twelve Years Prior

A warm summer breeze parted the tips of the pine trees, allowing moonlight to slip through in its wake. Far down below, amongst thick trunks and twisted roots, anyone taking a midnight stroll could look up and catch the edges of constellations shimmering between the needles and cones. As animal instinct overtook the human brain, which it tends to do in this kind of wild darkness, they could make their way along the paths with their heightened natural senses. The adrenaline would fuel both the confidence of a predator and the ever-wary fear of prey.

And then, as they moved along, they would feel something strange.

Their spine would tingle, their hair would stand on end, and the animal brain would make a quick retreat, bringing back a very human fear of the dark and the unknown within it. They would strain for something that they could neither see nor hear, but they could feel in every nerve of their body.

Overhead, the warm breeze had suddenly taken on a harsher edge; it was rank and slithering, like the stale air that a long-sealed door exhaled when cracked open. It clawed at the branches, rattled the bark and yanked on the pine cones as it hissed through. A few birds, slumbering shortly before, vacated their nests to get out of its path. The eggs left inside turned rotten instantly. The disturbance passed as quickly as it came, but it left the peace of the evening rippling like a broken reflection on a lake. If anyone were passing through the forest that summer night, they would have a foreboding feeling that they were not alone.

Some miles away, a house sat on the edge of this forest, just a stone's throw from the tree line. It was an old, distinguished house, proudly made from the wood that grew before it.

Standing on the wide porch was its owner, equally old and distinguished—and one would be forgiven if they thought her to be made of wood as well. Her body leaned forward like a lithe willow tree as she watched the dark forest intently. Her thick, sturdy hands were curled like two more burls around the head of the weighty staff that supported her. The incoming wind stirred her long white hair across the shawls she had draped over her back, wisps of snow encroaching on the mantle of autumnal colors. After a short time, she whirled about and retreated past the threshold, releasing her held breath inside the room.

The space was filled with things made for living simply and well—heavy wooden furniture sat upon rugs woven with beautiful linear designs, and bundles of herbs and dried flowers were piled upon each surface, infusing the room with scents from the fields beyond. All of the windows were fully open to the summer night, letting moonlight and cricket song in.

The woman moved through the room with purpose, snatching the shutters and pulling them closed, then bringing down the sashes. No lamps were lit within the house, so darkness followed in her footsteps; but she didn't break stride, gliding through her domain effortlessly and sealing all apertures.

"Mab?" A muffled voice came up through the basement door that had just been shut.

Mab didn't answer, but carried on with her mission. She had already closed everything on the first floor of the house when the basement door creaked open again.

"Mab? What's going on? Why's it so dark up here?"

This youth was only a couple awkward years away from adolescence—they still carried some of their childish pudge, especially around their face, which was framed by a mop of towheaded curls. Far less used to the darkness than Mab, they stumbled forward and made a quick tumble to the floor, nearly leaving the imprint of a chair arm on their forehead.

Mab was suddenly at their side, snapping the door closed behind the child's tripping feet. "Up, Job, no time to waste! Run upstairs and close every window, bar it if you can."

Anxiety bubbled within Job's stomach, but they hurried to follow orders. They managed to feel their way to the banister and used it to climb the winding stairs, up to a second story that had yet to have moonlight expelled from it. For as long as they had been in this house—nearly four years now, if they were counting right—they had never seen a window barred or a door locked (save for one). Nature had always been allowed to come and go freely, like a kindly neighbor known for many years. Nevertheless, Job went now, yanking shut the old shutters and pulling down petrified sashes, cringing at the sharp noises they made. It sounded like the house was in pain, being strained in ways it was not used to.

After the task was complete, Job dropped down onto their bed, puffing and sweating. From the doorway of their room, they saw a candle's light bob up the stairs. Mab's weathered face came into view, the shadows finding shelter in its decades of aged lines. It was never a face that Job had been frightened of; for as long as the youth had been there, they had felt safe under Mab's tutelage and care, regardless of how strict she could be at times.

Mab scanned the wide oaken beams that made the ceiling, as if checking each crack. Job tried to ask again.

"Mab, what—"

"All accounted for? Good. If this house can hold anything else half as well as it holds dust, we should have little to worry about."

"Mab, what's going on? Why are we closing everything?"

Mab finally looked directly at Job; her eyes held a curious warmth that almost outshone the candlelight. "Preparations, Job. We're making ready. And now it's time for you to go."

Job's perplexity mounted. "Go? ... Where?"

"Away." Mab was hastily stuffing a travel bag from a nearby closet with an assortment of items. "Take this candle, go downstairs and gather up all your work. Bind it all together tightly, and don't forget the things in the basement."

Job accepted the candle and paused at the doorway. "But what am I supposed—"

"Hurry yourself now. We've only got a little time before it gets here."

In less than a little time, Job and Mab were standing at the front door, peering out at the forest beyond. The wind had started to pick up a bit, causing Job to shiver in spite of himself. Mab's hand was on their back, guiding them out onto the porch and then securing the straps of their overstuffed travel pack, while also giving them instructions.

"You know the old forest path well enough to follow it in the dark. Take it to the main road, then head south until you get to the neighboring farm. That's where you'll start to be safe; from there, make your way into town."

Job managed to hold their ground at the front steps. "Mab! Please tell me, what's this all about? What's coming?"

At that moment, something from the direction of the forest made the both of them turn about sharply, muscles tensed, a reflex with no apparent trigger. Mab put her thick, gnarled hand upon Job's shoulder, massaging the tightness out of it.

"A bad visitor. Reeking of sulfur and forgotten hate."

#

The old woman watched the shadows of the forest path swallow Job's small form, until they couldn't be distinguished from the fireflies.

She tried to take in a calming breath, but the air was already beginning to smell foul. She slid back inside and headed for a collection of aged wooden chests and cabinets that dominated one corner of the house. Out of them came bundles of dried herbs, paper packages wrapped with twine, and foggy glass bottles with browned, washed-out labels. Mab filled her arms and carefully climbed the stairs; decades of traveling feet had worn a unique sound into each step, and Mab took precious moments to savor them.

The mistress of the house reached the landing and followed the hallway to its terminus, where she came to a door, the only one that was ever locked. It was painted a deep, proud shade of red, its mullions lined with gold. In comparison to the rest of the house's quaint humility, this door felt like the eccentric adopted member of a family. Mab produced a key and presented it to the lock, and the door opened into a room that was decorated sparsely, yet with solemn purpose. Mab stepped delicately between the maze of chalky lines drawn on the floor, around the candles standing like soldiers at attention, to the one piece of furniture in the room: an old rocking chair facing the now-open red door. She emptied the contents of her arms into it and hurried over to the room's solitary window. She tugged on the sash to lower it, but it was just as resistant as the others to being suddenly forced closed. An errant gust slipped between the sash and sill just before they met; it sent the rocking chair into a creaky fit, depositing its load all over the sigils that covered the floor.

With an extra *hmmph* of strength, Mab snapped the window shut. "Not yet, creature. 'Tis rude to come early to an event held in your honor ..."

As she shuffled about the room, gathering up the items again, she found her fingers twitchy, and her joints creaked as they did in the cold, despite the summer night. In response, she stoked the coals of her ancient voice and tended the flickering flames into a quiet but resilient

verse. It was one that she had recited to Job many times as they fell back into dreams, commonly after they had awoken from a dark terror. They said they never quite understood the meaning behind the song, but it had always managed to soothe jittered nerves. It did so for Mab now.

*Left, right, left and a right
straight in a row now darling child
so long as your feet fall fairly
safe you'll be from garden fairy
tip, toe, tip toe and tap
let not one twig underfoot snap
lest they hear, lest they see
found and captured and taken you'll be
queendom of fairies, kingdom of elves
in which so many children lose themselves
only those darlings with purest heart
far from home they will never be.*

The song's warm comfort faded with Mab's voice, and the unfamiliar chill seeped back in with a vengeance. Time no longer remained, as the last guest to flee the house. Finally, Mab closed the red door again, then stowed her weary body in the rocking chair. She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. The air was still now, the pressure dropping out—the calm before the storm.

And then, it was here, all at once and terribly angry.

The front of the house was slammed with a tremendous gust of wind, making the windows tremble in their frames and flinging the accoutrements of the front porch off every which-way. It made a couple laps around the house, tearing up the grasses and pawing at each secured shutter.

Mab managed to not react when it inspected the window right behind her; even when tightly closed, the stench of sulfur managed to creep in. It moved on, back to the front of the house ... A few moments of tense silence. It sounded a bit further off, back near the tree line again ...

But then it found the door.

From upstairs, Mab could hear the doorframe being splintered and crunched as it pushed its way in. The first floor was being thoroughly searched; furniture was smashing, windows were shattering, even the ceiling underneath Mab's feet was being scarred and torn up; she could hear it, like rusty scythes being dragged across finished wood. It found the stairs and devoured them, riser by riser.

At the landing, it knew where to go; it was at the red door. It gave pause; the door shuddered a bit, not admitting the intruder any further. The portal had a familiar essence, one that belonged to the same world it did. But it would not be stopped, since the entrance was not sealed. The fool within had voided its protection.

And so it entered.

Its presence was overwhelming; bulbous and thick, like a shadow glutted on despair. It took up all the light, all the air; its very self invalidated the pure souls of the living. But its profane work could not be wrought in this room; the candles flickered to life, the bells chimed,

and the mantra that rose from Mab awoke the spell drawn upon the floor. Suddenly, the intruder found itself trapped.

Mab cackled. “How does it feel, beast? This is a pain you recognize, no? Old magic from a Craft long since forgotten, like you.”

It shuddered and squealed in response, disdainful of this new balance of power.

“Wretched thing. And men of cloth thought our kind to be comrades. No, we witches were never your wives nor your slaves. Since the beginning of time, you were one more thing we fought against, because our souls are our own.”

The room had begun to quake with the indignation of the demon, which was exerting all its force to free itself, possibly by destroying the space that contained it. Mab took up the gnarled staff that she had left by the side of her chair, twirling it around in her hands. “It’s no use! So long as this house is rooted to the ground below, you’ll do no more evil in this world!”

It did not like that. As long as it existed, it had evil to do. And while a spell may bind it fast, its dark wrath knew no earthly bounds. And so it screamed. And thrashed. And hated.

#

“Hold the damn camera still, Archie.”

The woman finished checking her makeup in the lens of a TV camera, steadied by a man she accused of being Archie. Once she was done, she pushed open the back doors of the van and hopped out onto the soggy dirt road, peering into the woods next to where they were parked.

Archie followed her out. “Desiree, this address is probably just an empty plot. No one actually lives this far out, except maybe a yokel with his meth lab.”

Desiree wiped the mud from her boots onto the wet grass beside the road. “It’s here. We’ve got two separate yokels telling us she lives right up here. The driveway’s probably pretty

overgrown, she's old, y'know, old people don't take care of their property." She turned to face Archie, now momentarily confident her outfit was on point. "Look, all the other stations are already crawling over that story, there's nothing left for us. Massive house fire, fourteen people dead except for a toddler? That's huge."

"That's a tragedy, too," grunted Archie.

"That's news." Desiree scowled at him through the camera's viewfinder. "We are reporters. You have that camera for a reason. And I am the rising star of Channel 8—I don't need help from amateurs who are gonna waste my talent by whining all over the place. Shape up or ship out, Archie. You know the deal."

"Didn't mean nothin' personal," Archie muttered. "But you know what happens to reporters who come off as insensitive to the viewers. I got no problems handling my camera, but I don't like filming gaffes."

Desiree had finished their conversation halfway through Archie's mumbling and was now stalking down the road, searching on either side. Archie sighed and trudged along after her, and had just suggested they head back to town for better directions when Desiree let out an excited shout.

"Here it is! Wha'd I tell ya, the driveway looks like a hiking trail! Jeezus! Not getting the van in here. Hurry it up."

The pathway leading into the forest past the faded sign marked "48 Bruja Road" was crowded by slim saplings. Desiree swept back the branches blocking her path, and Archie took them in the face, preferable to the staggeringly expensive camera lens.

She shouted back to him as they walked. "Right, so remember, this woman's supposed to be the only nearby relative of the family that died in the fire. The kid who survived, I think she'd

be her granddaughter. This lady lives so hardcore Walden-like she might not have even heard about it yet, so we're gonna have to be delicate. But also make sure to get her genuine reaction."

By this time Desiree had turned around to talk at Archie and was walking backwards, fixing her hair each time a branch brushed it. "We're gonna be sad, she's gonna be sad, it's gonna be a sad, intense moment. I'll probably have to hug her or something, but then I'm gonna be like, BAM, don't worry, your darling grandkid is still alive. If she's religious, we'll go with that angle, chalk it up to a miracle from God, hit that Sunday-morning demographic real hard. Then—"

"Desiree, stop."

"Archie, I told you already—"

"No, Desiree, stop walking now!"

Desiree did and noticed Archie's face, which she had simply been throwing information at before. It was even more slack-jawed and confused than usual. Then she turned around and found herself breathless. But she was a professional reporter; it only took a few seconds of stunned silence before she motioned to Archie, whispering, "Get the camera. Get the camera up. Oh my God. I can't believe this ... This is a whole 'nother level."

They had indeed come up on an empty lot, as Archie had suspected. But where there had once been a cabin, old and distinguished, just like the woman who lived in it, there was nothing. Nothing and a hole. A giant, gaping hole, nearly fifty feet wide, that opened into the earth and dropped into darkness.