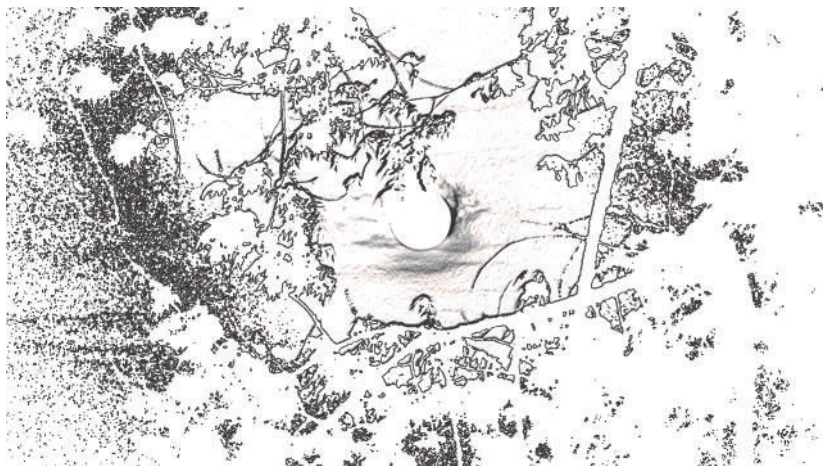


The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph. A bright, full moon is the central focus, its light creating a soft, ethereal glow. Dark, intricate silhouettes of tree branches and leaves frame the moon, adding a sense of mystery and depth to the scene.

WHEN NIGHTMARES FALL

EDITED BY
ELIZABETH HARVEY

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When Nightmares Fall

Edited by Elizabeth Harvey

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*To JP, without whom I would never get anything done,
and to KT for giving me the chance to do what I dream.*

— Elizabeth Harvey

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Preface

As the premiere book for Divertir Publishing, this collection is the culmination of a significant effort by everyone involved. It has been an experience that will not soon be forgotten. The learning curve was steep but incredibly rewarding, and it is with great pride and pleasure that I write this introduction. The writers in this collection are nothing short of wonderful, both as people and as authors. I'm very excited to share these authors and their stories with you. I believe they are truly skilled in their craft, and I thank them for sharing their writing with us.

These stories came together after I decided to create a collection that would appeal to readers while capitalizing on what people I knew were writing. The “supernatural suspense” genre kept coming up again and again. It's one of my favorite genres and one that I find most satisfying as a writer. It is also what most of the authors I know tend to focus on—birds of a feather, after all. My goal was to showcase the skill of these authors and help them achieve their aspirations.

Having the ability to help people achieve their dreams is a heady wine that I hope you will share with me as we salute and celebrate the beginning of what we know will be an exciting step in the writing careers of these fantastic individuals.

— *Elizabeth Harvey*

The House That Jack Built

by Verena Sandford

I'm glad it's not one of those dark, stormy nights, Jack thought to himself as he entered the house and imagined what it would look like illuminated by lightning. It was creepy enough anyway. The estate agent unsuccessfully clicked the light switch up and down several times before he sighed. "Sorry about this. They must have cut off the electricity."

"Doesn't matter," Jack said and held up his torch, "I'm prepared." He stepped into the large hall and looked around. Despite the darkness, he could get an idea of what this house was all about. It was old, with a musty, vacant smell about it, and Jack had a vague idea that it already had that smell when it was last occupied. Taking a deep breath, he imagined the

previous owners as being nearly as old as the house: an elderly couple with white hair, each hunched over leaning on their walking sticks. Jack turned on the torch and shone it around the hall. *The high ceilings are nice*, he thought before walking into the sitting room.

The size of the room struck him. It was large enough to throw a gala in, and the parquet flooring certainly looked very inviting. Through the large bay window he could see the front garden, which consisted solely of tall trees and bushes nearly blocking out the light. The far wall was almost entirely taken up by the largest marble fireplace Jack had ever seen. The ceiling was high, like in the hall, and had a magnificent ceiling rose in the middle. Jack could just see a crystal chandelier hanging from it. He adored the room.

He moved on to the dining room, which was large enough to host a dinner party for ten. Jack smiled at the thought of Helen cooking dinner for ten guests, as she was not the best cook in the world and certainly not very keen on it. If it were up to her, they would probably get a take out for ten. He saw the back garden through the bay window and walked over to have a look outside. Although he couldn't see much, by now he wasn't sure if he cared what the garden looked like. Just the ground floor was so full of potential, and he loved it.

He tried to calm himself down and look at it realistically — it was old, needed a lot of work, and would probably be very expensive to fix. To test this theory, he pushed his car key into the window frame only to be disappointed with the ease with which it went in. The fact that all the windows had to be

treated for dry rot only reinforced his pessimism. Looking down, he saw that the floorboards were peppered with holes created by long-dead woodworms. Crouching, he took a screwdriver out of his coat pocket, shoved it between two of the boards, and used it to lever one of them up. It came up with unfortunate ease, allowing Jack to see the ground. Pulling out his torch, he flicked it on and shone the light into the dark hole. Rat droppings covered the ground and Jack winced. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was rats. He turned the beam and the light fell on a little tray full of blue pellets. Rat poison. At least that was good news; the droppings were probably old. He lowered the board and shoved the screwdriver back into his pocket before he rubbed his hands together, blowing on them. Damn place was freezing.

The estate agent looked out the window. Jack found him unusually quiet for an estate agent and suspected that even he could not find anything good to say about the place. He replaced the floorboard. "How long has this house been vacant?" he asked.

The agent turned around and smiled at Jack. "About three months." The dust around the place suggested otherwise, and Jack was sure that he was lying. He decided not to go into it. "It has come back onto the market quite unexpectedly," the man continued. "The previous owner bought it as an investment but had problems with his finances and had to pull out. Quite sad, actually. He was very distressed."

Jack was barely listening. He checked out the kitchen and

breakfast room and could not see anything that did not need a lot of work done to it. The conservatory looked quite new, but during the recent storms a branch from one of the trees had fallen onto the glass roof and shattered it into thousands of pieces. Nobody had bothered to do anything about it, and the subsequent rain had spoiled the wooden flooring.

He started to go upstairs. "Mind the second step." He heard the estate agent's warning just in time. Instead of stepping over it, he lifted the carpet and looked at the step. It sported a hole about the size of a foot. Jack left the carpet up and stepped over it.

The house was enormous. The six bedrooms were good sizes and each one had a fireplace, though the ceilings in two of the rooms looked close to collapse. One of the fireplaces had fallen over, and the marble was cracked in various places. Still Jack loved it and was trying hard to contain his enthusiasm. "It hasn't got central heating, then?" he asked the agent, even though he already knew the answer. He brushed a cobweb that was almost black with dust out of his way while he listened to the other man's awkward excuses. Thinking about the house's potential, he went to a window and gazed outside.

From up here the view was magnificent. The house was at the end of the village, overlooking it like a castle on the top of a little hill. Behind it were only fields and woodlands. Jack stood and looked, and wondered how he could sell this idea to his wife. Eventually he turned around.

"I'll think about it," Jack said noncommittally. The agent

noded, though he didn't expect Jack to buy it. Truthfully, he couldn't imagine anybody wanting to buy this old ruin. They shook hands and parted company. Jack was so excited he could barely stop himself from running to his car. He forced himself to walk slowly and made sure he did not look around as he walked. If he wanted to get the price down he could not give the impression that he was really bothered about buying this place.

§ § §

"Honey, I swear to you, the place is perfect," Jack said for the fifth time. Helen was still unconvinced. "I can do it up myself. It's a lot of work, but I'm a builder and I have a lot of friends in the trade who can help me out cheaply. It's going well under price, and I might get some more off if I try. Please, honey, think about it! You don't have to live there. It's just an investment, but it will pay off big time!"

"I don't know, Jack," Helen said, but he heard in her voice she was beginning to come round. "It will be so much work, and I know you. You will spend every spare minute up there and I'll hardly ever get to see you. And what happens if you can't sell it when it's done? After all, it's in some tin pot village in the middle of nowhere—who wants to live there?"

Well, I for one wouldn't mind getting out of London, Jack thought. "People will kill to get that house when I'm finished with it." Helen smiled, and Jack took that as a good sign. He

put his arms around her and kissed her. "Please?" he said. She sighed and nodded and Jack felt a wave of relief. That had gone better than expected.

The next day he phoned the estate agent, deliberately putting on a rather bored voice and offering £50,000 less than the asking price. He knew that was a bit bold of him, but figured if the offer was rejected he could always up the bid. A couple of hours later the estate agent rang back. The offer had been accepted. Jack was speechless. The house had been cheap to begin with, but now it was almost a gift. He had never heard of a silly offer like this one being accepted first time, and a small, niggling doubt came into his mind. Maybe the house was worse than he thought. He had only seen it in the dark and never paid attention to the roof. What if it had subsidence? He bit his lip, worried that his decision had been rushed, but then brushed his doubts aside. It was too cheap to expect anything more than a ruin. He had always been proud to say that he was a good builder, so here was his chance to prove it.

§ § §

Jack whistled as he climbed up onto the ladder. The gas and electricity had still not been reconnected, but Jack expected someone to do so later that morning. He shivered and considered lighting a fire in the big, marble fireplace, then decided against it. Better not light that old thing before a chimney sweep had given it the once-over. But this house sure was cold.

The first task was to get some light into the place. He gave the dark, heavy velvet curtains a tug and they came tumbling down, together with the curtain rail and part of the rendering. Jack fell backward off the ladder and landed on the wooden floor, winding himself in the process. Not a good start, he thought as he slowly clambered to his feet again. He swore and gave the curtains a good kick.

He worked late that night. Helen had been right, he thought, feeling guilty, but he could not tear himself away from the house. He had made a lot of progress in one day, and if he could just finish this...

"Jack."

He looked around. "Helen?" he asked, stunned that she had made the trip out to the house, especially at this time of day. It was nearly dark outside, and Helen didn't like driving in the dark. "I'm in the master bedroom, honey!" he called to her. When he did not hear her answer, he went to the window and looked outside. Her car was not in the drive. *What the hell did she do with the car*, he thought. "Helen? Where are you? Come upstairs, will you?"

Again, he heard no answer. He was getting annoyed now. Just a few more minutes and he would have finished for the day. He stormed down the stairs. The front door was closed and there was no sign of Helen. "Helen?" he shouted, now concerned. He could not find her anywhere. Just to be sure, he dialed her number on his mobile phone. She answered instantly. "Where are you?" he barked at her.

"What do you mean, where am I?" she asked, and Jack

could hear she was annoyed. "I'm in the kitchen throwing your dinner in the rubbish bin. Where the hell are you?"

Jack was confused. "You haven't been at the house?"

"No, I haven't, and you better not be there much longer if you want to live," she said, and hung up on him.

Slowly, Jack put the mobile down. He was sure he had heard her call his name. He grinned uneasily and rubbed his temples, feeling silly. It was probably just a floorboard creaking or something. He went back upstairs and finished what he was doing. On his way home he stopped at a garage and bought some flowers for Helen. It wasn't a good idea to get on the wrong side of her on the first day.

§ § §

"Jack."

He spun around, this time sure it wasn't Helen. She had made it quite clear that she would not drive all the way out to the house to see him. If he wanted to see her, he knew where she was. Someone was in the house—a squatter maybe. The house had been empty for a while, and it was possible that someone had moved in before him. "Hello?" he called. "Who's there?"

"Jack," he heard someone say.

He could not work out where the voice was coming from. It was a woman calling him, an older woman by the sound of it. "How do you know my name?" he called. He picked up a hammer and started walking from room to room. The woman did not answer him.

"Listen, lady, I own this house now, so you better find somewhere else to live, okay?"

He heard faint laughter. "Of course you own it, dear," he heard the woman say. The voice was coming from behind him and he turned around quickly, bracing himself. There was nobody there. He walked back into the room he had just checked, thinking she must have managed to sneak in when his back was turned, but the room was empty.

"And what is this nonsense about living somewhere else?" The voice came from the ground floor. How the hell had she got there that quickly? Jack ran down the stairs. "We live here together, dear, like we always have ever since you built this house."

The kitchen. Jack was paying little attention to what she was saying—she was obviously deranged—and when he found her he would turn her out and that would be the end of it. Nevertheless, he was cautious. He pushed the kitchen door open with his foot, holding the hammer in both hands, ready for her to attack him with whatever weapon she might have armed herself with.

The kitchen was empty. Jack blinked twice to make sure, but wasn't entirely surprised. The old crow knew her way around the house; she probably crept out the back door while he was tiptoeing up to the front. The back door was ajar and Jack relaxed a little, lowering the hammer. He crossed the kitchen quickly and bolted the door. There. That should keep her out. Just to make sure he called out. "Hello?" When she did not answer he felt silly. He went back upstairs and looked at the

work he had been doing. He did not feel like finishing it that night and tossed the hammer down. The ceiling would have to wait until tomorrow.

§ § §

The first thing he spotted as he drove up to the house was the lights. Finally they had managed to turn the electricity back on. Jack mumbled a couple of swear words under his breath, thinking the lights had probably been on all day. He got out of the car and briefly noted that the lights were on in every room. What was the probability that the light switch had been left on in every room? He considered the thought, and came to the conclusion that it was probably the squatter again. Not only had she found a way back in, but she also turned all the lights on. Jack grimaced; he really did not need this aggravation.

He tried the door. It was locked. So this was not where she had got in. The back door was bolted from the inside—he had made sure before he went home the night before. He walked around the house and found all the windows closed. He tried them one by one. They were locked from the inside, and he cursed again. The old woman must have tricked him into thinking she left the house when really she had been in there all along.

He unlocked the door and went inside. The place was freezing, much colder than he would have expected. He slammed the door behind him. “All right, lady, listen up! I know that you are in

here—you've left all the lights..." Jack walked into the sitting room and stopped in mid sentence. Someone had lit the fire. It was burning high and generating quite a bit of heat. There were candles on the mantelpiece. The room would have looked very cozy had it not been for the odd circumstances. Despite the heat from the fire, Jack was shivering. Damn, this house was cold!

The curtains were drawn. Jack was sure they had been open a minute ago when he walked around the house, so she must have just closed them. A sudden realization hit him as he stared at the curtains. Of course they had been open before. He had taken them down two days ago to let some light in through the windows, and he had not yet put them back. And not only the curtains, but the rails had come down as well. They had been replaced.

Jack felt faint. He walked over to the curtains and touched them almost shyly. They had been cleaned. More so, if he had not known better he would have sworn they were brand new. How had she done that? He dismissed the question. There was no way an old lady had cleaned the heavy velvet curtain, replaced the curtain rails and hung them back up all by herself. Somebody had helped her. There was somebody else living here, and even then this was nothing short of a miracle.

"Welcome home, Jack," she said behind him.

He turned quickly on his heels, and again he was faced with nothing but emptiness and questions begging to be answered. Had he thought before that she was old? He must have been mistaken. Her voice was young and seductive. "Where are you,

lady?" This was getting ridiculous. "I'm not going to play games with you again. You come out now or I call the police!" Jack shouted, louder than he had intended to, and realized that he was a little bit afraid. He checked the room for a tool he could use, anything he could carry that would make him feel less vulnerable, but the room was empty. Spotless, actually. The parquet floor looked like it had been freshly waxed, and Jack groaned involuntarily. He didn't like feeling insecure, allowing his irrationality to manipulate his common sense. What the hell was going on? He had heard that squatters live in filth, but squatters that clean the house for you and repair curtain rails? There had to be another explanation.

He walked into the dining room and winced when he saw that the roof in the conservatory was no longer leaking. The glass had been replaced, as had the second step on the staircase. Jack walked up the stairs with his back to the wall. He scolded himself for being childish, but at the same time did not move away from the wall. He did not know how many there were and it was better to be safe than sorry.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he was not really surprised to see that the work he had not finished the previous night was now done. The ceilings had been stabilized, the fallen fireplace refitted, and the rooms decorated. His tools were neatly stacked in a corner. He picked up the hammer, and after a moment's consideration took a spanner for good measure. Despite the freezing cold, sweat was dripping off his forehead and running into his eyes. He wiped it away with his sleeve.

"What's going on here?" he whispered. His eyes were darting around the rooms as he moved quietly around the second floor. He did not see anybody.

"Welcome home, Jack," he heard the woman's voice.

He screamed. The voice came from the master bedroom. Jack had just been in there and it had been empty. Jack had the almost overwhelming urge to run.

"Come to me, Jack! It has been so long! Come to me, my darling!"

Jack stopped in his tracks. Her voice was so sexy, so... longing. Who was she? Why did she call him? Suddenly Jack had to find out what she looked like. He turned and walked to the master bedroom. "How do you know my name?" he asked as he opened the door.

The woman was lying on the bed, covered only by a satin sheet. Only there was no bed and no sheet. The illusion was wavering, like an old black and white picture projected onto a moving cloth. The woman smiled at Jack but she was not there, either. Jack could see the wall and the floor through her and shivered. This room was positively freezing.

"Why, you are my husband, dear," she said with a hint of impatience in her voice. She stretched her arms out to him. "You built this house for me, but then you left. I was alone for such a long time, but now you are back and everything will be all right. I feel so young, so good. Come to me, my darling. Make love to me now and we will be together forever."

When Jack took an involuntary step back, the look on her face changed. She sat up in the illusory bed, clutching the satin

sheet to cover herself up. "What is it, Jack? Why don't you want me?"

Jack was trembling. He raised his tools and noticed how much his hands were shaking. "Now, look, lady..." he began, but she did not let him finish his sentence. She floated out of the bed and toward Jack faster than he could back away. He tripped over his toolbox and landed hard on his back. She hovered above him.

"Lady?" she hissed. She raised her hands as if to grab him, and Jack frantically crawled backward to get away. "Why are you calling me that, Jack? I am your Claudine! I am your wife, and I demand that you treat me like that! Why won't you kiss me? Have you met another woman? Is that why you have been away so long?"

With every word she seemed to age, and Jack had time to realize that the house aged with her. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the ceiling sagging, the fireplace falling and breaking, and when he reached the second step, coming tumbling down the stairs head first, he found that broken too. His hand went through the hole desperately seeking something to hold on to as he fell all the way down, and he screamed when a piece of wood pierced his arm. The woman was still following him, hovering over him. She now looked ancient, and when she opened her mouth again part of the skin covering her face ripped and allowed Jack insight into her head. He screamed and hysterically pulled on his arm to free it.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked. "Don't you love me anymore?" Jack ripped his arm out of the broken wood, not caring that

he cut it further, and ran for the door still screaming. He opened it, but before he could get out the woman's arm rushed past his face and pushed the door shut. Jack turned and ran blindly into the kitchen. The kitchen door was bolted and Jack struggled with the bolt, his shaking fingers unable to undo it. He felt her presence behind him; she was as cold as ice, breathing on his neck and shoulders as she spoke.

"Make love to me now, and we will be together forever," she whispered.

Jack tore away and shoulder-charged the window, ducking his head as the glass shattered. The rotted window frame gave way under his weight, sending him flying into the front garden. Staggering to his feet, he noticed his face was bleeding. He looked around but the ghost was nowhere in sight. "She can't leave the house," he whispered to himself and laughed uncontrollably. He tripped and fell, sending waves of pain up his bleeding arm. Jack made it to the car, and dropped the car keys twice before he managed to unlock the door. When he drove off with screeching tires he made sure not to look in the rear view mirror.

§ § §

The estate agent tried the light switch a couple of times. "Seems they cut off the electricity," he said apologetically.

"Never mind," the man said. "I think it's still bright enough to get an idea." He looked around. "Old," he said.

The estate agent agreed. "It has quite unexpectedly come

back on the market," he said. "The previous owner bought it as an investment, but he ran into trouble with his finances and had to sell again. Mind the second step... I'm afraid it's broken."

Spiderface

by Vincent Ngai

The house on a tiny suburban lot was already swarming with cops by the time Ann pulled in. An officer was already at her window before she finished parking. As he approached, she lowered the glass halfway.

“Can I help you?”

“Ann Ranger. Here to see Detective Aiden.”

The officer seemed skeptical but picked up his radio and barked, “Get me Detective Aiden.”

After a pause, a voice replied through the radio. “Aiden here. Go ahead.”

“Someone named Ann Ranger here to see you.”

“Send her up.” The officer lowered his radio and gestured for Ann to follow.

Ann took a glance above him as she walked in his wake. The white house was spotless, save for the giant hole in the wall of the second floor. Grime surrounded the damage as if

the house was bleeding filth, but through it Ann noticed a distinct pattern that reminded her of animal tracks.

Inside, Ann found every room filled with police. An adult couple was in the dining room where an officer was trying to interview them through their barely coherent sobbing. The weeping followed her through the walls as she followed the officer up the stairs.

At the top, a large black man emerged from a bedroom, nodded and said, "Thank you. I'll take it from here."

Ann kept quiet as the officer nodded and started back down the stairs. She noticed an uneasy look on the large man's face that lingered even as he politely offered a handshake, which she accepted.

"Detective Aiden. Thanks for coming."

"Didn't know the police called people like me."

"Our mutual acquaintance likes to keep your people... open to mine."

"Seems so," Ann muttered as she followed him into the bedroom.

The detective stepped aside to give her room to enter and continued, "Chief told me about you. Didn't buy it till recently."

"Same here, actually."

"Yeah? What changed your mind?"

Ann looked at him for a moment before quickly answering, "Long story."

The large man leaned back against the door frame and asked, "You really who we sent for? Don't even look like you're out of high school."

"I'm twenty three," Ann said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

"Guess puberty short-changed you."

She grunted dismissively, making another mental reminder to herself that one day she should get around to buying more professional clothes than the loose, ratty jeans, her tank top, and that black trench coat that made her look smaller than she already was. Maybe then they'd take her more seriously.

She eyed the room as she made her way to the middle of it. There were dirty clothes and sports memorabilia scattered everywhere, in addition to some choice bits of women's lingerie. Dried blood caked the bed and floor in a splatter that led out the hole in the wall.

"What are the facts?" she asked, feeling like she'd seen too many bodies that week already.

"The parents were out for the weekend and their son and his girl decided to have some alone time. By the time the parents came home early this morning, the kid was gone and the girl was in pieces. The weird part is that no one noticed until the mom came to the bedroom."

"No one noticed a huge hole in the wall?"

"They say it looked fine until she touched something. Next thing everyone knew, there was a giant hole and a dead girl. As far as we can tell, some big animal came in through the wall, killed her, and dragged the boy off. Not that anyone buys that story, which is why you're involved." His skeptical expression suggested he hadn't been the one to make the call.

Ann closed her eyes for a moment and took a quiet,

meditative breath. As her mind calmed, her body felt like it became transparent. She felt a decisive chill to the air, but as far as she could tell that was just the breeze coming in through the gaping hole in the wall. Ann opened her eyes and moved towards the hole—debris crunching under her sneakers with every step—and knelt down to examine the damage. There were several gashes she was certain were claw marks.

“No one heard anything?” she asked.

“Not a damn soul. Everyone we questioned insisted they heard and saw nothing. After the second time this happened, the chief had me call you.”

“Second time?” Ann turned back to him and let her senses dull back to normal.

“Yeah. Been a couple of incidents like this. We had some kids at school questioned. All we’re getting is some weird story about a bunch of them having the same dream. Somehow it lets them know they’re a target.”

“What are they dreaming about?”

“A woman, or so I’m told. Not sure actually. I’m told you people can... sense things. Sense anything?”

“No. I don’t think there’s anything here to sense.”

The detective snorted and shook his head. “Almost had me thinking we just hired a kid consultant from the secret Catholic Wizard School.”

Ann swept the room one more time but felt nothing new. She turned back to Aiden and asked, “What about those kids you mentioned? Got any I can talk to?”

"There is one who came straight to me. He says he's sure he's the next target."

"Take me to him."

§ § §

Aiden led her just two blocks down to another house squeezed onto a tiny lot. The detective knocked on the door while Ann looked around the neighborhood and let her thoughts drift. Once again, there was a sudden cold breeze—one far stronger than before.

"Ann?"

The voice was garbled and unfamiliar, which snapped her to attention. When Ann opened her eyes the neighborhood was dark and covered in ice. The rotting corpse of a Chinese girl stood in front of her, dressed in the stained remains of a pink dress. It glared at her with shriveled, blank eyes. She snarled with a ripped mouth filled with black nails for fangs and lunged. Ann stepped back and her hand dove into her coat for her gun where it rested in a shoulder holster.

"Ann!" Aiden's outraged voice broke through, and suddenly Ann was back in a normal neighborhood with the detective and a woman at the now open door giving her shocked looks. She froze in place as her mental image of the dead girl faded. When she was certain she was back in reality, Ann took her hand off her sidearm and rubbed her face.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Aiden asked.

"Sorry. I... thought I saw something."

The large man nodded slowly, though something in his eyes suggested that conversation wasn't over, before he turned to the other woman and flashed his badge. "Mrs. Laurence? I'm Detective Aiden. We need to ask your son a few questions."

"Is he in trouble?"

"That's what we need to find out."

The woman nodded slowly and replied, "I'll go get him."

As soon as she left, Aiden glared at Ann and hissed, "What was that about? Do they train you to draw your damn gun on civvies in Catholic Wizard School?"

"I sensed something. Something big," she muttered, rubbing her forehead.

Aiden opened his mouth to respond, but before he could Mrs. Lawrence returned with a teenage boy. He was about a head taller than Ann and dressed in a loose t-shirt and shorts. His scraggly red hair was a greasy mess, and he looked too thin and utterly exhausted. His eyes had the haunted look of someone that was too terrified to sleep.

Ann stepped forward and asked, "What's your name, kid?"

"Kevin."

"I'm Ann and this is Detective Aiden. We understand you've been having some bad dreams, Kevin. Same dreams the other murdered kids had. What can you tell me about them?"

"You're a police officer?" Mrs. Laurence squawked, unbelieving.

Ann sighed, "No. I'm from the church."

Kevin's eyes suddenly widened with hope. "You're a Martyr, then?" he asked breathlessly. Though rather startled, Ann kept her expression neutral and merely nodded.

"Kevin?" his mother asked.

"It's okay, Mom. Lemme talk to her."

Mrs. Laurence gave them a concerned look, but eventually she nodded, "Shout if you need me."

Once she was gone, Ann looked at Kevin, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "How do you know about us?"

"My grandfather was one and he used to tell me all about you guys. Sounded like something out of a movie. Ever since this started happening though I never believed him. And now you're here, so I guess he was right."

"Well, he was and I'm here to help you. So what's going on?"

Kevin rubbed his hands together nervously. "About a month ago a kid in my class started having dreams about this creepy woman we call Spiderface. She comes twice, and only if you have a girlfriend. Third time, the guy disappears and the girl is killed. At first we thought it was just an isolated thing, but then other guys started talking about having it too."

"And now you've had this dream?"

"Twice."

"Hold still," Ann said and stepped forward. She placed a hand on Kevin's head, closed her eyes, and let her mind expand once more. This time the cold shot through her so fast that she hissed in surprise and pulled back.

"What is it?" Aiden asked as his eyes went wide, fear filling them.

"A curse, and a big one," Ann replied while she rubbed her hand.

What color remained in Kevin's face drained. "C—can you cure me?"

"Not that easy. I'm guessing a demon put that on you. Some kind of psychic spell that needs time to grow, which might be why she has to visit three times. Are you dating anyone right now?"

The boy rubbed his arms like he felt something crawling on him. "For about a day before I got my first dream. My girl, Judy, thought breaking up would make it stop, but it didn't. It's like Spiderface just knows."

"So she goes after you even if you break up?"

"Well, not Brian. After his first dream, he and Christie broke up so he started dating her sister. She's the one who got killed."

"We were just at Brian's house, actually. He only moved in recently too. Before that a girl lived there who was also called Spiderface," Aiden said.

Kevin shifted uncomfortably and murmured, "You mean Sharon? Sharon Mabel? I knew her. She had this huge acne mark on her face that looked like a spider. Plus she was kinda fat so she was always getting picked on. Last year, she hung herself."

Ann sighed, "Good job."

Kevin raised his hands defensively. "Judy and I tried to

talk her out of it! Besides, this Spiderface doesn't look anything *like* Sharon! We just call her that because some of the guys said they saw spiders on her face."

"What do you think, Ann? Dead girl coming back for revenge?" the detective asked sardonically. The police always called them but never actually wanted their help.

"Seems that way. Where was she buried?"

"There's a cemetery on the west side of town, near an orchard. She had family living near there. Grandparents, I think." The detective held his chin in thought. "They're pretty old so they don't go out much."

"Let's check that out then." Ann turned to leave, but suddenly felt something tug at her sleeve. She found a panicked Kevin tightly holding her.

"What about me? I haven't slept for two days! If I fall asleep again she'll come for me! Maybe even Judy, too! What are we supposed to do?"

Ann opened her mouth, but no words came out and her mind stalled. It was a good question. When she looked over at Aiden, he shrugged and offered, "Maybe you two should date?"

She stared at him. "What?" Her voice was flat and the expression on her face must have been rather empty because he backed up a step.

"That might get Spiderface off of Judy's back and bring her right to you."

The idea made perfect sense, but Ann wanted to protest anyway for reasons that did not become clear until she took another look at Kevin.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Sixteen."

"I'm sure most people would buy *you* being seventeen at least," Aiden chuckled in a manner that wasn't entirely friendly.

"I suppose you have a point," the Martyr sighed. As much as she doubted a fake date would fool a psychic demon, she could think of no alternatives that would allow her to both protect Spiderface's targets and root the demon out at the same time.

The detective started back to the car and said, "I'll get some people to keep an eye on Judy. Just in case." Ann wanted to say something sarcastic about how they'd done a fantastic job protecting Brian and his girlfriend but she bit her tongue. If he was going to help she'd accept it because at the moment she had no choice.

Ann instead turned back to the boy and said, "Kevin, get your mother so we can tell her what we're doing. Then, I guess we should make this official while we check out that graveyard."

Kevin grinned and muttered, "Great place for a first date." When she shot him another glare indicating she heard him, his smile faded and he quickly added, "So you sure this will work?"

The young woman softened her expression and patted him on the shoulder. Her thoughts briefly went back to a girl standing in the rain as she said, "I won't let anything happen to you, Kevin. I promise."

§ § §

Though Ann understood dating as two people spending time together in an attempt to build a romantic relationship, she doubted he was in any condition to fake any kind of interest in her. The thought of her doing the same, faked or not, sickened her.

Kevin made no objection when she suggested a fast food meal to make their pairing as “official” as Ann could see it becoming and gave her directions to a Wendy’s that had just opened for lunch.

Ann fumbled with the receipt as she took the bag from the hair-netted woman at the drive thru window and handed it to Kevin. When she glanced at him, an older, more handsome man with smooth features and black hair tied back in a pony tail smiled at her and took the bag. She drew in a sharp breath as the warmth bled from her body.

“Matt?” Ann whispered incredulously. She blinked twice to try and see if what she was seeing was real. After the second time, Kevin was sitting across from her giving her a puzzled look. Blood rushed back to her face, which she promptly slapped, and she growled, “Damn it.”

“You okay?”

“It’s the curse. It’s got me seeing things since I’m sensitive to this stuff as a Martyr,” Ann explained, still blushing as she grabbed their drinks and plunked them into the tray before pulling out of the drive-thru lane. She drove off a bit faster than was technically legal, determined to waste no more time getting to the cemetery.

After a moment, Kevin spoke up, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Her face must have twisted up in some unpleasant way when she looked at him, because he immediately recoiled. The boy turned his gaze out the window, cleared his throat, and added, "U—unless you don't want to."

"Sorry. I just haven't really talked to anyone since I left home years ago. Not exactly something I can just share with a stranger, you know?"

Kevin's voice became more confident and he relaxed, leaning back into his seat, "Sharon was the type to keep things bottled up, too. I don't think it's a good idea, and sometimes it helps if the listener doesn't know you. Besides, dates are where we're supposed to get to know each other better."

At a light, Ann stopped to glance at Kevin as he shoved some fries into his mouth and offered the rest to her. A slight smirk briefly formed on her lips as she helped herself to a handful and munched down on them. After she finished she asked, "Ever make a promise you couldn't keep?"

"Like I said, everyone picked on Sharon so she had no friends or anything. One day, I just decided to talk to her. We became friends and I promised to help her if she ever needed it, but I guess I wasn't there enough for her." Kevin sighed and slouched in his seat, his shoulders drawing up defensively.

The light turned green and they drove through onto a straightaway. Ann fished for more fries while letting her thumb guide the wheel as she said, "I can relate to that. I

promised my best friend we'd always be friends no matter what. Then I left her over something stupid and by the time I realized it, it was too late."

"What happened to her?"

The Martyr shifted uncomfortably for a moment before she finally muttered, "Demons."

"They do this kind of thing often or what?"

"Incidents are actually rare. Most people can go their whole lives and not see a thing. When they do happen, though, it can be a disaster. And even when we stop it there's no evidence to prove anything."

"That's why you guys can't just go to the President and say, 'hey, demons are real and killing people so we need some paranormal police to stop them?'"

"Exactly."

Silence settled between them as the busy stores that cluttered the road eventually gave way to a patchwork of forests and open spaces. The change in scenery stirred more memories Ann would have preferred to have remained undisturbed in the back of her mind.

"So why are they here?" Kevin asked.

"Sad thing is, demons start here. They used to be human."

"Really?"

"Demonic magic can be very appealing to desperate or greedy people. Accepting it is always a choice, but doing so allows the worst part of you to take over. After that... even the best intentions just become mindless destruction."

Kevin looked down in thought and asked, "Can demons turn back into people?"

"Yes. If they redeem themselves"

"How do they do that? Just say 'I'm sorry?'"

Ann shook her head and jabbed herself in the chest with a finger as she said, "Has to come from in here. The change has to be real and you got to act on it or you're just lying to yourself."

Silence settled in again for a minute before Kevin asked, "... So you think Sharon is Spiderface?"

"Yeah."

"Can anything be done for her?"

"I'm not sure. It's up to her really."

"What about me? I never asked for this curse." He sounded scared and defensive.

"You're just collateral to demons, but don't worry. I said I wouldn't let anything happen to you and I'm going to keep that promise."

She could feel a surge of warmth and relief coming from his direction as he smiled at her. "Thanks."

Ann returned his smile and gave him another pat on the shoulder. "No problem."

§ § §

An old metal arch held up by old chunks of weathered stone marked the cemetery's entrance. A single main road split the place neatly in half, while smaller branching arms

divided the rest into neatly organized plots. To her right, in the distance beyond the cemetery, Ann spied a single farmhouse hunkered on a grassy hill and felt a cold so intense that she involuntarily shivered.

Kevin was not affected, but he noticed and asked, "What's up?"

"I think we're getting close."

When she felt the cold intensify to an almost bone-chilling level, she stopped the car. "Stay here," she said as she opened the door to the car.

"Is it a good idea for us to split up?" Kevin yawned, putting his hand over his mouth. He was exhausted, though fear was keeping him moving. However, it was obvious that the energy from fear was starting to run out.

"We may not have a choice if you can't stay awake. I should be able to tell if she's coming but..."

Despite the summer-warm breeze that blew over her skin as she stepped from her car, Ann could still feel a piercing cold oozing from the graves she passed. She pulled off her trench coat and left it on the driver's seat, revealing a harness with two holsters situated beneath her arms with semi-automatics in them. Her belt sported loaded magazines in pouches, and a combat knife occupied a sheath on her right thigh. Finally, Ann fished out a teal scrunchie from her pocket and used it to wrangle her hair back and out of her face.

She followed the feeling up a small hill, passing a host of unremarkable graves. After a few feet, she shivered again

and found her eyes drawn to a grave labeled “Sharon Mabel” at her feet. The plot looked reasonably recent, though undisturbed. Ann knelt down and ran her hand over the grass. The blades were soft and cool to the touch, which seemed authentic enough... Except, she remembered, it was hot today and she was directly under the sun. She ran her hand over some grass beside her. It was warm and dry.

Ann put her hand on the cool grass again and reflected on Kevin’s gratitude and concern, focusing those feelings inside into a warm sensation that filled her. She imagined the warmth going to her hand, through her skin, and over the ground. The grass instantly collapsed in as if growing on a thin layer of dirt over an empty chasm. The fragments dissolved into mist and vanished into the dark, yawning pit below.

The Martyr peered down at the now-open grave, noticing that the coffin’s cover was open and the coffin was devoid of a corpse. Suddenly, an intense, electric chill shot up her spine as a heavy fog abruptly closed over the yawning hole and swallowed her feet. She lifted her head and turned to look back towards Kevin and the car. She realized that the fog had grown so thick in those swift moments that it had swallowed the bright, midday sun. A woman’s voice echoed in the distance, raised in gentle song.

Hush little baby, don’t you cry. Mama will make sure that you never die. Turning around again, Ann saw a vast wall of fog thicker than the rest drifting across everything like a devouring mass. In what was still visible of the other section

of the graveyard, she saw a tall, thin figure emerging and approaching the car where Kevin was sleeping.

So sleep, little baby, and don't feel blue. Mama's gonna make all your dreams come true. Ann whipped out her keys and hit the alarm several times but nothing happened. She drew one of her pistols, flipped off the safety, and started dashing back for the car.

And if you dream of love so true, Mama's gonna bring your prince to you. When she reached the vehicle, the figure had come near enough for the Martyr to see a woman's shape. The remote lock still didn't respond, so she jammed her keys into the manual one. It refused to give, as if the lock was just a solid piece of metal. Growling, Ann slammed hard on the glass with her fist and screamed, "Kevin! Wake up!"

And if your dreams are filled with hate. Kevin did not stir, so Ann pointed her gun at the backseat window and fired twice. A cloud-like burst of safety glass appeared, punching open a hole in the window, causing the rest to splinter, collapse, and give her room to reach in and open the door from the inside.

Then Mama's gonna take those whores to their fate.

Something heavy landed on the car and Ann looked up to see a massive set of hairy mandibles barely a foot away from her face. She lifted her gun to fire at it, but a long limb swept in from her right and casually swatted her off her feet. Ann felt the air rush out of her as she was lifted off the ground and sent flying down the road. Her back hit the earth with a bone-jarring thud. She gasped in pain, fighting to get her breath back, while lifting her head to see what hit her.

Climbing down her car was a giant spider that looked as if it had grown out of a man's body. The skin of a large human male stretched tightly over its bloated form, giving it the strange appearance of a fat man with long, bony limbs crawling low to the ground dragging its bulk down the slope of the car's windshield. The legs had been reshaped out of the man's limbs, ripping each in half and each one ending in claws of twisted bone. Instead of a head, there was merely a bloody neck stump where the mandibles, belonging to no creature on Earth, looked as if they had chewed open a hole to eat through. Looking at the grotesque creature, the only name Ann could conjure up was "skincrawler" and so that was what she decided to call it.

Ann climbed to her feet and lined up her sights with the center of the monster's "mouth." A heavy shot thundered out of her gun, but in the split-second it took her to bring her weapon back down from the recoil, the monster was to her left and the shot hit nothing but pavement. She hadn't even seen the thing *move*, let alone had the ability to adjust her aim for it.

The skincrawler pounced at her, throwing itself through the air with surprising speed. Ann twisted her body to her left and stepped back, narrowly avoiding being hit. A claw sliced through her shirt, leaving a large tear over her stomach but only lightly grazing her skin. She completed her turn, brought her hands together around her piece, and aimed while the demon was still scrambling to face her again. This time, the .45 hollow-point struck one of its leg joints and it

exploded in shower of bone and yellow ichor. The creature stumbled onto the pavement shrieking and scratching at the ground wildly with its remaining legs. Ann put one more shot into its “face” and the creature stopped moving completely.

From behind, Ann could hear the lullaby end. She spun around and found a tall, thin woman with gray, withered skin smiling down at her with dry lips and a single, gaping eye glaring down at her, the rest of the woman’s face hidden behind a curtain of black hair. Ann thrust her piece into the towering demon’s face and fired. The face blurred and a hole appeared as if she had just shot through the fog itself and soon settled back to normal.

A curse was about to escape Ann’s lips, but long, thin fingers slithered around her neck, cutting her off. Her gun was taken away and crushed by another withered hand. Ann clawed furiously at the demon’s grip, but could only touch her own neck as she was lifted off the ground. Spiderface made an echoing chuckle and casually tossed Ann aside.

The Martyr flew across the street and landed flat on the grass. Pain stunned her senses as if her body became dead weight, but she managed to lift her head and see Spiderface moving towards the car. The Martyr closed her eyes and began to concentrate, calling up a warmth within her that soothed her pain and lightened her battered body.

When she opened her eyes, the skincrawler came bursting back into view overhead, coming straight down towards her. She pushed hard against the ground, going into

a desperate roll. The shockwave of the beast landing slapped her entire body, but she was clear and the monster seemed to knock the wind out of itself. Ann rose to her feet and drew her knife.

The first lesson she was ever taught about a Martyr's power was that it all came from within, but could be channeled to anything the user held. Bullets were no longer part of her weapon the moment they left the barrel and thus could carry no enchantments, but a knife never had to leave her hand. Most Martyrs were trained in knife play for just that reason. Ann flipped the blade into a reverse grip and drove it down into the demon's body while pouring all her efforts into a single thought of protecting Kevin. Golden light lit the creature from within with a fiery glow that erupted out of its every orifice. The skincrawler fell to the ground in a smoking heap of burnt out flesh.

Ann staggered back, but caught herself, gasping for breath. Frantically, she looked over towards the car. Kevin had emerged from the car and was standing, dumbly gawking up at Spiderface with glazed eyes.

"Kevin!" the Martyr shouted.

He responded, but not to her. "Sharon is waiting for me?" Spiderface bowed her head in acknowledgment, her face vanishing in the shadows cast by her hair.

Ann flipped her knife back into a forward grip and raced towards them, but the demon turned towards her. From behind the towering woman's back, a long, black spider leg emerged and spat out something stringy and white that hit

Ann in the chest and sent her back to the ground again. She groaned half from her pain and half from pure frustration as she grabbed at the substance on her and held up thick, sticky webbing.

Suddenly, Spiderface was looming over her with that single, unblinking eye staring down at her with hate, but smiling like a child at play. Ann saw something shuffle under the curtain of hair as it was draped over her until all she could see was darkness.

§ § §

Something wet touched her face, and Ann realized it was raining. She opened her eyes and found herself on a street in a quiet, familiar neighborhood. The only other soul with her was a short, scrawny girl with blonde hair tied into a pair of braided pony tails draped over her chest. “Mary?” Ann asked, fumbling with the name for a moment in sheer confusion.

“Allo, Ann,” the girl said in a thick British accent as she offered a cheerful smile despite the sadness in her eyes. She gestured to the house closest to them—a small, two-floor house with yellow sidings and a brown roof that Ann recognized as her own—and added, “We should probably go inside. Everyone’s waitin’ and you don’t want to catch cold, love.”

Ann felt an itch on her throat and scratched it absent-mindedly while her mind wrangled with the feelings that

were swirling around in her chest. Half of her felt that she was home, all was well, and that she should follow the girl's advice. The other half rejected everything the first part thought was perfectly logical, though she couldn't quite pinpoint why. "Who's waiting for me?"

"Everyone, love! All our friends, your parents, and of course, Matt." Mary chuckled teasingly at the mention of the last name.

The pain in Ann's neck began to throb as if trying to break through her trachea. She brought her hands up to her face and tried to rub away her confusion. Somewhere, behind the pain, she vaguely remembered another time and place far from here.

"Ann? Is something wrong?" the girl asked, her voice light and gentle.

Ann scratched at her throat as she muttered, "This isn't right. I shouldn't be here."

"Don't be silly. You promised we'd always be together and that you'd never leave me, remember?" Mary chuckled and offered her hand.

The voice in Ann's head told her everything was fine: Mary was her best friend, she had promised her, and there was nothing stopping her from keeping that promise. Her mind was convinced enough to try and block out any other possibilities, but there was one vague thought that Ann snatched through the tension headache that she was starting to feel clawing up the back of her neck: she *had* promised, but she *did not keep it*.

"But I did leave. Years ago."

"Well now you won't have to. Come with me, Ann."

Suddenly, Ann felt a burst of clarity that banished her headache and left her with a cold realization of where she really was. She took a step back away from the girl who looked like Mary and snapped, "No. This isn't real. You're not Mary!"

The other girl's faced twisted into a scowl and she lowered her face until her bangs fell over her eyes, obscuring them completely. Her words came out in a venomous hiss, "You're going to abandon me? Again?"

"Don't hand me any of that bullshit! You aren't Mary and this isn't real!" Ann reiterated.

The girl lifted her head, revealing lidless sockets of darkness in the place of her eyes. Her cheeks burst apart in a bloody shower as skincrawler mandibles ripped free. The creature uttered a screech that merged its voice with Mary's and lunged at the Martyr. Ann responded by ducking and coming up with an uppercut to the monster's gore-smeared "jaw".

Then she found herself on her back with the sun beating down on her face while an intense pain bore down on her throat. Something heavy and sticky held her down, but she had one free arm to grab at her neck. Her hand closed around a fat brown spider and tore it from her neck. It screeched at her with a high-pitched whine and Ann snarled in response, tightening her grip and silencing it with a pulpy crunch.

She tore at the webbing on her other arm frantically, freeing enough of it herself to rip away the rest. Once she'd

finally disentangled herself, Ann put all her strength into sitting up and broke free. Blood dripped from the bite on her neck, but her throat seemed to work fine and the blood flow was reasonably minimal. The Martyr dragged herself to her feet while steadying herself on a gravestone and forced her bleary gaze to sweep the area. Oddly, she saw no signs of battle nor did she see any demons, including the one she had killed. Her scan of the area stopped on the farmhouse in the distance where she once more felt a cold feeling that she had no more doubts about.

§ § §

A weak, rusted iron fence was all that separated the cemetery from the farm. Ann drove straight through, sending her car up the hilly rise towards the house. The terrain bumped her car along, smoothing out only when she reached the winding dirt path that ran all the way down the hill. She slid the car to a stop on the path in front of the house, kicking up a cloud of dust.

The Martyr stepped out and swapped in a fresh clip from her belt into her spare piece and chambered a round. She still had her knife, and the bandage she'd hastily applied to her neck seemed to be holding. Ann took another meditative breath and the pain from earlier dulled to the point where she could ignore it while her energy returned. She gripped her gun tightly in one hand and her knife in the other as she marched towards the house.

An old, locked door barred her path into the house. She gave the door a hard kick near the knob, causing rotten wood to splinter and the door to cave inward. It creaked open to reveal a hallway covered in thick, dusty spider webs. The cold sensation she felt on Kevin and at the graveyard was everywhere, threatening to smother her senses, but also cementing the fact that she was in the right place.

Ann moved with slow, deliberate steps, keeping as quiet as she could. Passing by what used to be a living room and a den, but was now thick with webbing, Ann got the impression of a giant nest and thought back to the skincrawler. Then she heard one hiss behind her. *Bingo*, she thought.

She spun around and saw one emerging from the living room she passed, but before she could train her pistol on it, another hiss came from above. A second creature dropped down from a hole in the ceiling just a foot away from her. Surrounded in the narrow hall, she couldn't out maneuver them, but then again, she didn't have to.

The closest skincrawler reared up in a fearsome display before slashing down with its claws. Ann wasted no time and stepped towards it, stabbing her knife just under its maw. She sent in a surge of holy energy—though less than before—that seared the creature's insides before firing at where she suspected its heart and lungs would be if it still had any similarities to human anatomy. Much to her satisfaction, the demon stopped moving and she stepped away. The corpse ripped free of her knife and hit the ground with a wet thud.

Ann turned in time to see the other one leap at her, but

was already moving to counter well before that. Drawing in a sharp breath and focusing her power, Ann thrust with her knife. The skincrawler landed on the blade and was repelled by a burst of golden fire, sending it tumbling backwards. While the demon staggered, Ann put its “face” in her sights. The first shot sent it sprawling further back, but still it screamed at her. She fired again and again, each shot steadily reducing the demon’s defiance into dying gasps. When her gun clicked emptily, the skincrawler finally fell to the floor and stayed there.

Ann paused to let out a sigh of relief while she pushed the magazine release and let the mag drop to the ground at her feet. Instantly, she regained her focus and slammed in the last clip from her belt.

A kitchen as green and overrun as the rest of the house was at the end of the hall. When she entered, Ann noticed a series of portraits decorating a cleaner patch of wall that showed the progressive aging of a married couple along with their growing family. A few photos included a chubby girl with a noticeable acne spot on her face. Under one picture of the girl alone was a dusty sticky note that read: *We thought our family secret would die with us, but for you, Sharon, we will use it one more time.*

Suddenly, a muffled voice singing to the tune of “Hush Little Baby” came from above. Ann whipped around, looking for a way up, and spotted a staircase to her left across the kitchen. She barreled up the stairs that wound to her left and into a narrow hallway that wrapped around the shape of the

kitchen. The first door on her right was a large bedroom. Inside, she found the room covered in enough webs to reshape the room into a round cave. The severed heads of several young men hung in the webbing with pained smiles stuck on their faces.

In the back of the room was a dirty old bed with the decayed corpse of a girl resting with her hands crossed against her chest. Kevin stood on one side of the bed, his fingers lovingly caressing the dead girl's cheek, a dreamy smile plastered on his young face. On the other side of the bed, her mouth stretched in a dark smile, stood Spiderface. Ann trained her gun on the demon and shouted, "Kevin! Move!"

Kevin did not seem to hear her, but Spiderface was already turning. Ann found that gaping eye glaring angrily at her while her dry, flaking lips twisting into a wide scowl. Ann fired a shot, but the bullet passed through Spiderface once more.

"Damn it! What the hell are you?"

Spiderface's lips moved, but it was Mary's voice that said, "I'm your friend."

She slowly began walking towards Ann and spoke again, this time in another girl's voice. She pointed a long finger at Kevin and said, "I am his friend. I want to be with him."

The demon clutched her long hands to her chest and an older woman's voice cried, "I told her she'd always be my precious little angel, but I let her die!"

The moment the demon stopped speaking she returned to her drifting posture with arms slightly spread. Ann reigned in

her anger, nodding slowly. "You're just Sharon's dream, not Sharon, aren't you."

The demon's lips twisted into a scowl and the girl's voice—Sharon's, Ann presumed—snarled, "Everybody hates me because I'm *ugly*! It's not enough for them to be pretty and have dates and friends! No! They have to rub it in! They have to remind me that I'll *never* have what they have!"

Spiderface suddenly curled into herself and whimpered, "I couldn't take it anymore. But I remembered there was one boy who was nice to me. He gave me a present for my birthday. He was the only one who bothered to remember."

Ann stole a glance past Spiderface to where Sharon lay, strangely peaceful, as if she were asleep instead of dead. Clutched in the girl's withered hands was a crudely made dream catcher.

"It was supposed to keep away bad dreams, but I heard you could wish for good dreams on them. I thought if I could just dream about having friends or being in love, then go to sleep forever, I could be happy forever."

Ann followed Spiderface's movements as the demon pointed at one of the grisly trophies on the wall, then tapped her own head afterwards. Spiderface pointed at Ann and dragged a finger across her own throat.

"I get it. You steal dreams from the guys and kill the girls as some kind of wish-fulfillment," Ann murmured, unimpressed. Once more, she stole a glance at Sharon's body and the dream catcher. Her arm snapped out and she took aim.

Spiderface let out a monstrous shriek and eight black spider legs swarmed out from behind her back. A shot of

webbing slammed into Ann's wrist, throwing her arm back and causing her shot to go wide. The other legs spat more strands and brought Ann down to the floor.

The demon swooped in and hovered over the Martyr, pulling her hair back to reveal the full horror of her face. Blood-red blisters blossomed from a split cheek, sealing the eye above with the swollen sores. The blisters cascaded down the cheek to the corner of the demon's mouth. One of the sores squirmed for a moment before the flesh parted and a fat, glistening spider wiggled free.

Ann pulled hard to free her hand holding her gun, but black spider legs came down and impaled her hands, pinning her completely. Her fingers reflexively tensed and she heard her gun go off, followed by Kevin screaming. Beyond Spiderface, Ann saw the boy clutching his shoulder where her shot grazed him. He looked quite awake and screamed at the sight of Spiderface's room.

"Kevin, the dream catcher! Break the dream catcher!" she yelled over his screeching.

Kevin seemed bewildered, but quickly understood what she meant. Spiderface flew across the room like smoke in the wind and stopped between him and Sharon's body, causing the boy to recoil with a frightened gasp.

The demon spoke in Sharon's voice, "Wait! Don't hurt me, Kevin!"

"Sharon?"

As she struggled to free herself, Ann shouted, "It's a trick! The demon is a parasite! It's using her!"

Spiderface hovered over the terrified teenager and clasped her hands together. Sharon's voice pleaded, "I thought you were my friend! You *promised!*"

Ann pulled hard against the webbing, stretching but not breaking it. Before her, Kevin was looking back and forth between Sharon's body and Spiderface, shaking with uncertainty. "Please, Kevin. Don't you want me to be happy?" The girl continued to try and get his attention.

Slowly, as Kevin settled his gaze on Spiderface, his breathing calmed and he regarded the demon with saddened eyes. He lowered his head, clenched his fists, and said "I do want Sharon to be happy. That's why I can't leave her like this."

Ann put all her strength, magical and mundane, into one arm and pulled. The webbing finally snapped loose and her arm came free, followed by enough of her body to sit up. She saw Spiderface's body explode into mist and Kevin became visible through the swirl. The demon whipped around and reached out, its fingers slithering around Kevin's arms, and pulled him back. Another blister burst, dripping a spider down onto the demon's shoulder.

The Martyr knew shooting the little spider was too risky, shooting Spiderface was useless, and she couldn't see the dream catcher. Instead, she aimed at Sharon's corpse and fired, striking the foot. Spiderface screamed like never before as the lower part of her burst apart and faded away and her form became transparent. Kevin ripped free of the demon's ghostly fingers and seized the dream catcher in his fist.

There was a barely audible snap, and blinding light ex-

ploded from the boy's hand. Ann shut her eyes as a storm of wind whipped around them. She heard Spiderface's scream dissolve under the roar of the wind as the rest of her bindings tore free. She tried to open her eyes, but the light was too much.

The wind threw Ann against the wall, her head striking the hard surface with a brain-jarring thunk and then, just as abruptly, both the light and the roaring wind vanished. Experimentally, she opened her eyes to find the room was filled with chunks of debris, though all evidence of Spiderface had evaporated. Sharon's body was missing as well; all that remained was a large burn mark on the bed. Beside the bed, Kevin was trying to force himself to his feet with limited success. Though Ann had little strength left herself, she called up one final surge so she could stand and stagger over to help Kevin.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she strained to help the boy to his feet.

He nodded and groaned, "I think so. What happened?"

The Martyr let her thoughts drift for a moment and found the cold chill was gone. There was no warmth or feeling of any kind. The room was devoid of any spiritual energy at all, leaving a scar that no one could see but would linger for a long time.

"It's over. Spiderface is dead," she sighed and let him go. Ann flexed her wounded hands which hurt, but would recover. Beside her, Kevin opened his hand which held the remains of the dream catcher.

He looked at her and asked as she took the pieces from him, "What was she?"

"A dream made into a curse."

"But how? I made that dream catcher in grade school." Kevin sounded confused and horrified.

"I saw a note downstairs. Her grandparents must have known some black magic and changed it themselves. Probably to bring her back to life, but I guess Spiderface killed them, too."

"But all they wanted was for her to be happy."

"Like I told you, even the best intentions can become mindless destruction when demons get involved," Ann replied and pocketed the remains of the dream catcher while the boy stared sorrowfully at the burnt bed.

"So what do you think happened to Sharon?"

"I don't know." Kevin sighed at her response, but nodded as Ann led him out the door.

"I take it we're breaking up now, right?" he muttered around a yawn.

"I think that's a pretty fair bet."

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