

# **The Ferryman**

by Troy Larson

©2015 Sonic Tremor Media

WGA Registered

## Chapter One

The sound of screaming women followed Tony out of the house. This time, it was about cigarettes. He had been sitting in the kitchen--one of those referred to as an "eat-in" kitchen in real estate ads. Really, it was a regular kitchen that happened to be *just* large enough to allow a small, square table and four chairs. Theirs was a ten-year-old model that had come from a secondhand store downtown; a cheap dining set with a thin metal strip around the table edge and a white Formica top with marbled-gold accents.

Tony was eating peanut butter off a tablespoon (because it was the easiest protein snack in a house where there wasn't much in the cupboard) when his mom had come home from work and found a few packs of cigarettes, Old Gold in the soft pack, missing from the carton in the freezer. It wasn't the first time.

"Lisa, have you been stealing my cigarettes?" she asked, in a voice that was a little too loud and a tone that was far too accusatory.

"Well, hello to you, too," Lisa yelled from her room down the hall.

Tony's mom marched down the hall, already yelling, "Don't be a smartass with me," she began, and Tony took the cue. This shouting match would soon devolve into an ugly spectacle complete with f-words and c-words and sobbing and tears.

It was just another day, really. Since the accident, his older sister Lisa had become a real pain-in-the-ass. He couldn't blame her, though. Lisa was only seventeen years old and would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, and he thought that was bound to make a person angry. There were anger and blame issues that complicated every interaction between his Mom and Lisa. They had been on a long trip to Georgia and Tony's mom had started to fall asleep while driving in Tennessee. Lisa had grabbed the wheel, the car rolled, and she was thrown out. She landed on her back, legs in the ditch and torso on the asphalt. Her spine was broken on the edge of the road. The screaming was coming.

He got up from his seat at the dining room table, tossed his spoon in the sink, and bounded down the back steps two-at-a-time. He hammered his hand on the handle of the screen door which swung open, strained the tension spring, and slammed shut with a thin, aluminum clatter.

In the back yard, the sound of shouting was decidedly muted. He turned on the spigot and took a drink from the garden hose. The water was cool and refreshing and tasted of metal. *The perfect drink to wash down a peanut butter spoon*, he thought. The garden hose didn't get used much since his dad left, which was a shame. They had a nice yard--sandwiched between Roosevelt Park and Corbett Field, a minor-league-sized baseball park--that most people would have envied, but a hard-working single mother with a handicapped daughter and a fourteen-year-old son who was just discovering girls didn't have the time to do the yard work, and she didn't have the desire to crack the whip on Tony to get it done, either. She was in the midst of the post-divorce popularity contest that kids from broken homes know so well, with each parent trying to outdo the other in being the "cool"

parent. Lisa had a different dad, so she didn't get the benefit of the recent divorce, but Tony got to do whatever he wanted, and he knew it.

He turned off the water, wiped his mouth on his Pabst Blue Ribbon t-shirt, and grabbed the handlebars of his bike which was in its usual spot--leaned against the t-shaped clothesline support. As he pedaled away, the wind blew through his almost too-long hair, a fashion statement he had adopted after his dad left as a way of showing his independence (he thought it made him look a little older, too). The sun was warm on his arms and the sound of shouting disappeared, and he was glad.

## Chapter Two

Traci MacDonald sat in the lower level of a gray, rented duplex, absent-mindedly watching TV and twirling her hair in her fingers. Her older sister, Shelly, an overweight blonde, busied herself making out in a recliner at the far end of the “family room” with a boy whose name Traci barely knew.

*“Devane, or something like that,”* she thought.

Her mom was at work, as she always seemed to be since Traci’s dad had died, and in the summer months when school was out, the family room had become the “make out and smoke cigarettes room.” On weekend nights, when her mom was out drinking and looking for a new man to fill the empty place in her life, it was the “drink and play Ouija room” and sometimes the “get dangerously close to having unprotected sex room.” It hadn’t gone quite that far for Traci yet, who was just a sophomore in high school, but Shelly had gone far beyond that mark on a number of occasions.

There was a knock at the door and Traci leapt from the sofa. Shelly and Devane kept making out without any hesitation. Traci ascended the short staircase to the front door of the split-level home and opened it. Tony stood on the step, a little sweaty from his bike ride (his house was in the valley, but Traci lived on south hill) with his hair blown-back in a manner that Traci found adorable.

“Oh my god!” she crowed, overdoing it a bit as she leaned forward and hugged him tightly.

“Hi,” she said, except she said it like it was one long word, *“Hiiiiiiiiiii.”*

“Hi,” he said and kissed her lightly on the lips, with just a tiny amount of tongue; the kind of kiss a boy who hadn’t yet lost his virginity would give when he started to get bold and move in that direction.

They first met a few weeks earlier at the softball diamonds not far from her house and the attraction had been mutual and instant. She was a year-and-a-half older than he was, and a couple years more mature than her own age; a burgeoning maneater. She had a direct manner and flirted with smiles and unwavering eye contact, a tactic she employed on men of all ages when there was something she wanted. Tony had watched her charm the pants off a softball coach two decades her senior when she had needed a ride to Dakota Square mall, and the coach had responded like a teenager. It was a skill she activated the moment she met Tony.

She led him to the basement makeout room where Shelly and Devane had apparently had enough making out, because they got up from the recliner when Tony entered. He sat on the sofa and Traci took the seat right next to him, crossed her legs in his direction, and snuggled-in against him.

Shelly looked in the mirror and fixed her messy, bleach-blonde mop to the best of her ability, and Devane tucked-in his shirt.

“Can I use your phone,” he asked?

“Of course,” Shelly said, “As long as it’s not a long distance call. My mom will shit when she gets the bill.”

“No, I just have to call, Lee,” Devane said. Shelly frowned.

Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out a squished pack of cigarettes. Old Gold in the soft pack.

“Wanna smoke?” he asked Traci.

“What kind of question is that?” she asked, and smiled broadly. Tony handed her a cigarette, put one in his own mouth, and lit them both with a match from the book on the coffee table. He felt grown up when he did it, and that was good, because he was the youngest person in the room and felt a little out of place.

Devane sat down in front of the rotary dial phone on the end table and dialed, fucked it up, hung up, and started all over again. He got it on the second try.

“Hey, man,” he said when someone, apparently Lee, answered.

“You going to the races tonight?”

Shelly went to the bathroom where she could be heard spritzing and spraying her hair with Aqua Net in an attempt to return it to its pre-makeout state.

“Yeah, I think Terry is racing tonight if you wanna go,” Devane said. There was a short pause and he asked, “Can you pick me up?”

“I will be,” he said. “I’m at Shelly’s right now.”

The voice in the phone receiver got a little louder and Tony could hear the murmuring voice on the other end from across the room. It reminded him of the voice of the teacher in a Peanuts cartoon. Devane busted out laughing.

“Yeah. Thank you, come again,” he said, laughing, as Shelly returned from the bathroom. She opened her mouth in the shape of an ‘O’ and gave him a look.

“Gotta go, man,” Devane said as he hung up the phone.

“How dare you!” she shouted at him as he got to his feet.

“C’mon, it’s just a joke,” he said as he nervously moved toward the stairs.

Shelly reached for one of her flip-flops beside the recliner and flung it in his direction. It bounced off the back of his head harmlessly. She grabbed the other and ran after him as he raced toward the door.

“Bye, Traci,” he said quickly as he beat a hasty retreat.

“Bye,” Traci said as she pursed her lips and exhaled smoke toward the ceiling.

“What’s that all about?” Tony asked.

“Thank you, come again,” Traci said with a smirk. “Our last name is MacDonald,” she said, explaining a little further, but not wanting to fill-in all the details.

“Shelly used to date Lee,” she said. “He dumped her after he got what he wanted and he’s been using the drive-thru joke ever since.”

Tony had heard the joke before, but he didn’t let on. The MacDonald girls had a reputation with some of the guys as an easy score, but he hadn’t known it until after he had already fallen for Traci, and he wouldn’t have cared anyway. She was a beautiful, auburn-tressed girl with a great body, and he was absolutely infatuated with her.

“Heh, heh. I get it,” he said, trying not to laugh too hard.

“So, what are you planning tonight? You wanna do something?” he asked.

Traci pointed to the space under the TV stand.

“I rented a VCR,” she said and smiled. “Wanna hang out and watch some movies?”

Tony smiled at her and thought about what might happen if he accepted her invitation. A sound effect that had come to represent “breaking news” played through the speaker of Traci’s 13-inch color TV and the news anchor spoke.

“The police say they do not yet have a suspect in the disappearance of an eleven-year-old local boy, Jonah Bell,” the anchor said.

Tony’s attention was drawn to the TV.

“I know that kid,” he said.

“Bell, who was just three days shy of his twelfth birthday, disappeared last Saturday while riding bike with his friends,” the anchor continued.

Jonah’s parents appeared on the screen. His mom, a woman Tony’s mom knew quite well from their days in high school, looked like she hadn’t slept in a year. She had dark circles under her eyes and wore no makeup to hide it.

“I can’t stop thinking about my baby,” she said. “I wonder if he’s cold, or if he’s hungry,” she sobbed.

“Please, Jonah, if you’re watching this,” his father said as he took over for his crying wife, “Please come home to us. And if someone has Jonah, please... we’ll do anything.”

Tony’s expression was pained as he watched.

“I used to deliver their newspaper,” he said. “Jonah was the nicest little kid. He used to ask me to play ball with him all the time when I went around collecting.”

“What do you think happened to him?” Traci asked.

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “Probably got snatched by some perv, I suppose.”

A photo of Jonah Bell, sandy brown hair in a bowl cut, with a small dimple in his chin, showed on the screen. Right next to his photo there was a picture of his bike, a distinctive green Schwinn with one yellow mag wheel and one black.

“If you have any information on the whereabouts of Jonah Bell,” the anchor finished, “you’re asked to call the police.”

### Chapter Three

Tony awoke the next morning with sunlight streaming in the second floor window of his bedroom. He looked at the clock on his nightstand, and the red, LED numbers showed 7:21. He threw back his blankets and climbed out of bed. While all his friends slept-in on summer days, Tony had always enjoyed being up early. The sun was up at 5:30 in the summer, after all. Seemed like a waste to sleep it away. Plus, he had moved his bedroom upstairs after the accident, so Lisa could have her bedroom on the main floor, and they didn't have air conditioning, so he knew if he stayed in bed much longer, it would start to heat up on the upper floor and he would be sweating. He hated that.

He made himself some toast for breakfast and ate alone at the kitchen table. His mom and Lisa were both still in bed, which was fine with him. Soon, Lisa would be awake and someone would have to help her into the shower, and then the shouting would begin. He didn't think she was a burden. She was his sister and he loved her. He didn't think his mom thought she was a burden either, but *Lisa* thought she was a burden since the accident, or at least that's how Tony saw it. She had yet to come to terms with the loss of her independence. As soon as she had to ask someone for help, the arguing would start.

He poured himself a glass of orange juice and thought about his night with Traci. They had made out quite a bit, and he had the impression he could have done more if he wanted to, but he hadn't. He wasn't quite sure how to take the next step. He suspected Traci had gone a little further with some of the guys she had dated, and she sometimes had this confused expression on her face when they were making out, like she wasn't sure why he wasn't pushing harder for more, but he just didn't know exactly how to proceed. So they watched John Carpenter's "Halloween," little bits of it anyway, when they had stopped kissing long enough to come up for air. He had arranged to meet up with her today at the swimming hole, and if he was lucky, he thought, *she might be wearing a bikini*.

Most of the morning was spent riding his bike around town. It was convenient recreation because the particular neighborhood where Tony lived was centrally located in Minot, North Dakota. It was a town of about thirty-five thousand people, which, in just about any other state, would have made it a small town, but in North Dakota, thirty-five thousand people made it the fourth largest city in the state. Anybody who visited in the summertime would call it Pleasantville, with temperatures in the seventies to the nineties on most days, and an occasional cool breeze to rustle the leaves of the century-old oak and elm trees lining the streets. Those same visitors might not find it so pleasant in the dead of winter, but the subzero temperatures "keep the riff-raff out," as Minoters liked to say. It had started as a railroad town as Europeans moved west into the frontier, got the nickname "The Magic City" due to its surprisingly fast growth in the early days, and while many small, high plains communities withered with the death of the railroads, Minot held much of its population, thanks in part to an Air Force Base seven miles north of the city. It was the kind of place where you didn't lock your doors at night and your kids could come home *after* the streetlights came on and you didn't have to worry. Until lately, anyway.

There had been exactly two high profile crimes in Minot in recent memory. An elderly couple had their throats cut in a robbery and home invasion by two ex-cons who then shot them in their heads before escaping with three hundred dollars. The suspects had been caught seven months later. “An idiot made friends with a psychopath,” Tony’s dad had said before he moved out. “Guilt by association, son,” he told Tony. “This is why you should always be careful about who you hang out with,” he cautioned.

And then there was the disappearance of Jonah Bell, just last Saturday. A well-liked little kid, just about to enter puberty, had disappeared while riding bike with his friends. Suddenly, people were locking their doors at night, and mothers all over the city wanted to know where their kids were at all times.

For Tony, most of the time, he was riding around in Roosevelt Park, across the street from his house, a perfectly safe place for a kid to spend the day, but as he got older, he started venturing further from home. One of those places was the “Ron’s Tavern” neighborhood, a small, industrial neighborhood that was nearly cut off from the rest of town by the river, the railroad tracks, and poor city planning. There were a lot of low-income rental properties in the neighborhood interspersed with warehouses and auto shops, and a former railroad bunkhouse that had been converted into an apartment building. The central gathering place was the neighborhood’s namesake bar, the weather-beaten Ron’s Tavern, a flat-roofed watering hole and gathering place for a crowd of regulars and transients.

It wasn’t the kind of neighborhood any mother wanted her kid hanging out, but the pull of a truck graveyard was too much for Tony to resist. He turned his bike from second avenue onto eighth street and pedaled for the vacant lot that had become the final resting place for trucks of all kinds. He pulled onto the sidewalk and into the lot, dropped his bike in the knee-high grass and surveyed his playground.

There were several big rigs, a couple local-delivery-type trucks, and some panel van trucks like the milkman drove in an earlier time. All were broken down and cannibalized for parts; the foam inside their seats exposed as the sun baked and cracked their vinyl covers. Some were on blocks, but most of them still rested on flat tires, their windows long ago broken out by vandals. If they sold tetanus shots for profit, this place would have kept the doctors in business.

Tony walked into the yard and imagined it was some kind of post-apocalyptic traffic-jam; a place where drivers had been waiting in their trucks when the end of the world came. He climbed into one of the trucks that had a huge “Sweetheart” logo emblazoned on the side--a former bread truck from the local Sweetheart Bakery. He put his hands on the wheel and cranked it back and forth, then looked into the sideview mirror and pretended the glass wasn’t broken out as he adjusted the angle of view. The key still dangled from the ignition, which was in the dash and not on the column. He turned it and imagined the roar of the diesel engine as it started. In reality, the truck remained silent, the battery long gone. He tried to remove the key, but it would not come out of the rusty ignition lock.

He moved to another truck--a small, cream-colored delivery van with faded, red lettering that read "Ernie's" on the side. Inside, there was a trap door in the floor of the cargo compartment. He opened it and saw the grass under the truck. "*What was the purpose of this?*" he wondered. There was no answer that came to mind, but it was pretty cool. He stepped down through the sliding side-door of the truck, got down on the ground and slithered underneath. Tony was fourteen, but his physique was lanky and slight. People frequently misjudged him younger than he was, and he easily shimmied to the trap door, pushed it open from below, and climbed up into the cargo compartment.

He brushed himself off and smiled. "*Awesome,*" he thought, and smiled. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the shriveling pack of Old Golds and a book of matches with "M&H" screenprinted on the cover. He sat in the driver's seat, struck a match, and lit a slightly-bent cigarette. He puffed on the cigarette to get it fully lit, then half-inhaled a drag. He did it mostly for the look and did not yet smoke for the nicotine hit.

As he exhaled, he got the strange sensation of being watched. Tony leaned forward against the big steering wheel, resting his forearms on it as he scanned the lot for interlopers. He didn't see anyone at first. A dog trotted by on the sidewalk, and he could hear railroad workers at the switching yard not far away. Then, he noticed a man.

A man in blue coveralls, the kind Tony's dad used to wear so his mom wouldn't bitch at him for staining his clothes when he was working on the car, was standing in front of a garage door at a shop down the block. "*Is he watching me?*" Tony wondered. The man stood half concealed behind a hedgerow that grew on a property between the shop and the truck lot, but he appeared to be looking in Tony's direction. Whether he was watching Tony or simply on a break wasn't clear.

He took another drag off his cigarette and suddenly, a voice behind him said, "Can I have one?"

He wheeled around, startled, to see a kid, another boy his apparent age, standing in the cargo area of the truck.

"Holy shit!" Tony exclaimed. "You scared the shit out of me, man."

The kid just stood there calmly, looking at Tony. He had blonde hair and dark eyes, and was a little stockier than Tony.

"Sorry," he said with little inflection. "Can I have one?" He gestured toward the cigarette.

"Sure," Tony said, giving him a smoke and the book of matches.

He had lots of questions, like "*how did you get in this truck without me hearing you?*" for one, but "What's your name?" was the only question that came out of his mouth.

"Lance," the kid said, taking a drag off his cigarette. He looked more experienced at smoking than Tony did.

"I'm Tony. I haven't seen you around before. Did you just move here?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Did you see that guy..." Tony began. He turned his head and pointed toward the shop, but the man in blue coveralls was no longer there.

“Where did he go?” Tony wondered aloud.

“Who?” Lance asked.

“There was a guy,” Tony said, and allowed the statement to trail off.

He looked at the shop again; scanned the surrounding area. The man was nowhere in sight. Lance said nothing, just smoked his cigarette. Tony took a drag off his.

“You’re not inhaling,” Lance said.

“Do you wanna go ride bikes or something?” Tony asked, not really understanding what Lance meant by the comment.

“I don’t have a bike,” Lance said.

“Oh, well, do you want to go to Kiddieland and get a pop and a candy bar?” Tony asked. “I got my paper route money. I’ll buy.”

“Ok,” Lance said, “That would be cool.”

The two boys walked to Roosevelt Park about a half mile away--Lance on foot, and Tony alternately walking his bike and riding it slowly--and got snacks from the concession stand at Kiddieland, a 1950s attraction that was about two decades past its prime. There was an assortment of outdated kids’ carnival rides--rockets and ducks and horses--all constructed of metal in the era prior to plastic, and all of which simply went around in a circle, rolling up and down on an undulating track. Tony had loved them just a few years earlier, but he was too old for that kiddie stuff now. The rides had long ago ceased to be an attraction to all but the youngest patrons, but the snack shop kept the place going, largely due to its fortuitous location near the pool. A local radio station played from gray, horn-shaped speakers mounted on the roof of the concession stand. An announcer identified the station as KBQ100 and launched into “*Don’t Fear the Reaper*,” by Blue Oyster Cult. The boys walked past a coin-operated newspaper machine and got in line. The headline on the paper shouted “NO LEADS IN BELL DISAPPEARANCE.”

Tony and Lance got their snacks--Lance chose a Laffy Taffy and cherry slush, and Tony got a Coke and a frozen Snickers--and walked to the bleachers outside the pool. They sat down and ate while they watched swimmers jump off the diving boards.

“I saw a guy do a Flying Dutchman off the high board once,” Tony said.

“What’s that?” Lance asked.

“It’s where you jump, and then you reach back and grab your ankles,” Tony said, pantomiming what looked like a very painful belly flop.

Lance’s eyes got big. “No way,” he said. “Off the high board?”

Tony nodded his head and they both laughed. People watching from a distance would never have guessed they had just met that morning. They were already behaving like lifelong friends.

“So, are you gonna be going to Central this year?” Tony asked, wondering if Lance was a public school kid or if he would be attending the Catholic high school.

“Are *you* going to Central?” Lance asked, and then followed it up with another question.

“Where do you live?”

“Oh, I live over there,” Tony said, pointing. “Right across from the windmill.”

“Is there anything fun to do over there?” Lance asked.

“Umm, like what,” Tony questioned.

“I don’t know.” Lance said, and shrugged. “Where do you wanna go now? I wanna do something fun.”

Tony thought for a moment and remembered he was supposed to meet Traci at the swimming hole that afternoon.

“Hey, I know what we can do,” he said. “You wanna go to Bums Jungle?”

“What’s Bums Jungle?” Lance asked. His eyes lit up.

“It’s this place kinda over by the fairgrounds,” Tony answered. “There’s a path through the woods, and a rope swing over the river and stuff.”

“Sounds pretty far,” Lance said, hesitating. “Why do they call it Bums Jungle?”

“I don’t know,” Tony replied. “Supposedly there’s supposed to be bums over there sometimes, I think, and it’s kinda like a jungle,” he explained. “It’s pretty cool though. And my girlfriend said she was gonna be swimming over there today.”

“You have a girlfriend?” Lance asked, smiling.

“Yeah, her name’s Traci,” he answered. “She might have a friend,” he added.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Lance said.

They tossed their cups and wrappers in a garbage can painted with a stick figure and the words “Pitch In” on the side.

“Hop on my handlebars,” Tony said. “I’ll give you a ride.”

Lance hopped on the crossbar of the handlebars on Tony’s BMX bike and the two set off for Bums Jungle.

## Chapter Four

The Souris River carved a lazy path through Minot, and meandered back and forth on its trek from Canada, down through the city, and back into Canada again. There were places in the valley where the river, more commonly referred to as the Mouse River by locals, wound so widely back and forth that it nearly doubled back on itself, creating peninsulas of land in the shape of lightbulbs, surrounded on three sides by the river.

Development was difficult in these tight spaces, and turning the lightbulbs of the Mouse into public use was an easy solution. Roosevelt park occupied two of these peninsulas which were connected by pedestrian bridges, but Bums Jungle, on a similar but undeveloped piece of land less than a mile away, was an area of wilderness with the river to the west, north, and east, and a residential neighborhood to the south.

Tony didn't know where the name Bums Jungle had come from or who had given it the designation. He had heard it from a friend and had found the area to be bum-free whenever he had visited, but it was a place where you could be away from parents and free from the spying eyes of authority. While you could swim at the pool, it wasn't without the supervision of lifeguards and parents who were swimming with their kids. This was a place that had an air of danger to it, and you could behave however you wanted.

To get into Bums Jungle, you had to go through a driveway of a house off First Avenue. When you got to the back of the property, a path that led to the rope swing and swimming hole continued into the trees.

When the boys arrived, Tony was surprised to find things a little different than when he had visited the previous summer. Someone had apparently done some construction on the adjoining property and a huge pile of dirt had been dumped over the path, blocking bicycle access. A steady parade of feet had beaten a path over the top of the dirt pile, forming a new path into the woods, and runoff, redirected by the new berm, had carved a tunnel under the dike at the river's edge exposing the roots of a Dutch Elm that grew nearby. Today, a handful of bicycles waited in the grass for their owners to return from the swimming hole.

"Wow," Lance said. "Look at this place."

Tony dismounted his bike and left it in the grass near the others. Lance was already on his belly, scooting into the tunnel under the tree roots. Tony followed in similar fashion and found the tunnel to be a tight fit. He didn't think he was claustrophobic, but he couldn't help feel a little uneasy in this tight space.

Lance exited the other side and dusted himself off, then ran to the top of the dirt pile and jumped up and down, shouting "Earthquake!" as Tony crawled through the tunnel. Dirt fell from the tree roots; got in his eyes, his mouth.

"Hey knock it off!" Tony yelled. He hurried through the tunnel, shimmying back and forth like a reptile, not wanting to be in there if the tunnel should decide to collapse.

“Sorry,” Lance said, and it was quickly forgotten. They continued down the path, toward the sound of voices and young people having fun, and as they rounded a bend, the rope swing came into view. A line of teenagers stood on the riverbank, some in proper swimsuits, some in shorts and t-shirts, and at least one in his tighty-whities, waiting for the swing.

“Cool!” Lance said. He was in OP shorts and a tank top, ready for a swim. He looked at Tony, then back to the rope swing, and scampered down the riverbank to take a turn.

Among the handful of teenagers swimming in the river, Tony spotted Traci. He left Lance to his own devices at the rope swing and walked down to the river’s edge. Traci spotted him right away.

“My honey,” she said loudly as she waded for the riverbank, again stretching out her words for emphasis. It came out, “My HUUUUUNNNNNEEEEE,”

“Hi babe,” Tony said coolly as she exited the river. She wasn’t wearing a bikini, but he wasn’t disappointed. She looked great, even in a one-piece. He kissed her lightly on the lips.

“I was wondering if I was gonna see you today,” she said, in full-flirt mode.

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” he said. “Who all is out there?” he asked, scanning her group of friends in the river.

“Shelly, Devane, and my friend Missy,” she said.

A swimmer plunged into the water from the rope swing and Tony stepped further up the riverbank to avoid getting splashed.

“I made a new friend today,” he said. “We should introduce him to Missy.”

“She has a boyfriend already,” Traci said.

“We should introduce them anyway,” he said, smirking.

He turned around and looked for Lance. The teenagers who had been swinging on the rope swing were gathering up their clothes to leave, and the rope was just dangling over the muddy brown water. Lance was nowhere to be seen.

“Lance?” he called out. There was no answer.

“You didn’t bring your trunks?” Traci asked.

“Nah, didn’t feel much like swimming today,” he said. He was embarrassed to admit that he had never learned how to swim.

Traci’s friends exited the river and started to gather their things.

“Are you guys ready to go?” Traci asked.

“Yeah,” Shelly said. “They’re hiring workers for the State Fair this afternoon. We’re gonna go out to the fairgrounds for the meeting.”

“I think I’m gonna hang here,” Traci said. Missy smiled.

“Suit yourself,” Shelly said. Devane threw his arm around her, and they wandered back down the path and disappeared around the bend.

Traci dried herself with a towel, draped it around her shoulders, and slipped into a pair of flip flops waiting on the riverbank. Tony watched her without making it obvious. He didn’t know how often he would get to see her in a swimsuit, and he was getting an eyeful.

From the corner of his eye Tony noticed movement. He looked away from Traci to see a man standing on the path. He was an old guy, gray hair, black baseball cap, and a brown leather vest. He stood silently on the path, expressionless, watching them on the riverbank below. His position on the path concealed his lower body behind foliage from Tony's vantage point, but he didn't appear to be hiding. He didn't seem like he was trying to announce his presence either, though.

Tony wondered whether this was private property and they had angered this man, the property owner, with their presence.

"Do you want us to go?" Tony asked.

"No," the man said. He continued to stand and watch.

"*Where the hell is Lance?*" Tony thought.

Traci casually walked up the riverbank onto the path and turned-on full Traci-mode. She made small talk with the man and he introduced himself as Willie. Tony thought Willie did not seem as interested in Traci's charms as some men, but he seemed friendly enough.

Tony ascended from the riverbank to the "notch" where hundreds of swimmers had created a passage through the foliage between the path and the swimming hole. Willie took two steps forward and met him at the notch, blocking Tony's exit.

From his position near the top of the riverbank, Tony was still two steps lower than Willie and his face was uncomfortably close to the old man's groin.

"Excuse me," Tony said, and looked up to meet Willie's gaze.

"Gotta pay the Ferryman for passage," Willie said. He bore a devious expression.

From further down the path there was a rustle of leaves. Lance stood near the edge of the path and stared at Willie. Tony thought there was something about him that didn't quite look the same. He thought he looked *older*, somehow.

"Where have you been?" Tony asked.

Willie looked over his shoulder at Lance, then back at Tony, then at Traci, almost as if he were sizing them up. The moment passed and Willie smiled and stepped aside. Tony climbed the final two steps off the riverbank and onto the path.

"I was just exploring," Lance said, but kept his gaze on Willie.

"Well," Willie said, "You kids have a great day." He turned to leave but had to sidestep Lance, who was blocking the path. He glanced over his shoulder once as he walked away and Tony thought he detected a smile.

"Um, I was supposed to be home at three," Lance said, "so I have to go."

"Hang on, I wanted to intro..." Tony said, but before he could finish, Lance had sprinted down the path and disappeared from view.

"That was Lance?" Traci asked.

"Um, yeah," Tony said. "He's a little shy sometimes, I guess."

There was a rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Looks like we might get a storm,” Tony said as he looked at the sky. The upper atmosphere was a thick gray shroud that dangled heavy, moisture-laden clouds like marionettes. They decided to leave before they got rained on.

“That old guy creeped me out a little,” Traci said.

“Ah, he’s probably just a lonely old dude,” Tony said. “My grandpa got a little weird before he died too.”

“Yeah,” Traci said, “but he reeked of that smell. Didn’t you smell it?”

“What smell?” Tony asked.

“Brimstone,” she said.

## Chapter Five

That night, the thunderstorm that had threatened all day finally rolled-in, and Tony climbed into bed and pulled his covers up to his chin. Lightning bolts crisscrossed the sky and lit up his room accompanied by loud thunderclaps as he drifted-off to sleep.

He didn't know what exactly Traci had meant when she said she had smelled brimstone that day. He looked it up in the encyclopedia when he got home and learned that brimstone was another name for sulphur, like the smell when someone strikes a match, but in the old days, people used to say you would smell sulphur if the devil was near. It was considered the smell of hell, residue from the lake of fire.

Tony's mind began to wander into the world of dreams between thunderclaps. His breathing slowed and he drifted off to sleep. He was back in Bums Jungle again, at the entrance, crawling through the earthen tunnel under the tree roots, but instead of coming out five feet away, on the other side of the embankment, he found himself descending deeper into the ground. He was on his stomach, slithering through the tunnel which narrowed and became too tight for him to get up on all fours. It got darker, and the narrow passageway began to wind,

*"Why am I doing this?"* Tony wondered. *"I need to get out of here."*

He crawled around a corner in the passageway and he started to believe someone, *or something*, was in there with him, and yet he continued to crawl. Every time he rounded a dark corner he was convinced something would be waiting there for him. It was evil, *terrifyingly evil*, and the last thing he wanted was to find out what it was. *He had to get out of there.*

*"I have to get OUT OF HERE!"* Tony thought, panicked, and tried to back out of the tunnel.

"Earthquake!" a voice shouted. It was Lance's voice. Dirt began to drop on top of Tony and he began to scream.

"EARTHQUAKE!" a voice boomed. It was a different voice this time. It was a deep, guttural voice, and the roof of the tunnel collapsed, burying Tony completely. The smell of rich, wet earth permeated the tunnel for a moment and then his face was covered in dirt and he could scream no more. He couldn't breathe. He was going to suffocate; smother to death in this tunnel.

Tony jolted awake, mouth open, gasping for air. He had been sleeping facedown in his pillow, struggling to get a breath, until his subconscious had frightened him awake. The thunderstorm had passed, and now a light rain tapped on the roof over Tony's bed. He rolled onto his back and as the rush of his nightmare passed, he drifted off to sleep again.

## Chapter Six

It rained for most of the summer after that and Tony didn't see Lance at all. As the weeks passed, it occurred to Tony a couple times that he hadn't gotten Lance's phone number and he didn't know where he lived, either. Lance hadn't even answered him on whether he would be going to Central High in the fall, and Tony was starting to wonder what had happened to his new friend.

The search for Jonah Bell continued through the summer, to no avail. The police announced a lead every now and then, primarily to keep the story in the news, but nothing ever developed. It was like the kid had simply vanished.

In the last week of August, just before school began, the weather turned colder and the weatherman started to predict an early fall and cold winter. People were doing their school shopping and indulging in sweater and boot sales. The leaves actually started to yellow, which was exceedingly rare for August, even in North Dakota, and then, as if to spite the forecasters, a last blast of summer arrived. A wave of eighty degree temperatures moved-in, and on the last Tuesday before school, it hit ninety.

Tony rode his bike to the truck graveyard and hoped he might run into Lance, but nobody was around. He rode to Kiddieland at Roosevelt Park, but Lance wasn't in the park either. As a matter of fact, hardly anyone was in the park. Despite the warm temps, most people seemed to have moved-on from summer and were ready for the school year, autumn, and the holidays.

There was really only one other place Tony could think to look--Bums Jungle. It was warm enough. Maybe Lance had decided to go back and get in one last swim before the season was done.

## Chapter Seven

The man stood in his living room, watching the boy at the end of his driveway through the picture window. The man's name was William Schmidt, but everybody called him Willie. He wore a plaid button-up shirt under a brown leather vest, blue jeans (of a material other than pure denim) with an elastic waistband, and dark brown ankle boots with a buckle on the side. It was his uniform of choice nearly every day. Sometimes he added a bolo tie to dress it up a little, and he would splash on some Stetson cologne if he had dinner out somewhere.

Kids were coming and going all the time these days, leaving their bikes at the edge of his property on their way to the swimming hole, and he had spent an increasing amount of time watching them lately. Sometimes he got out a video camera he had purchased at the pawn shop and recorded video of their comings and goings.

"Just in case someone steals something," he had told a neighbor who once caught him taping the neighborhood kids on his property.

He was a Korean War veteran, had served his country with distinction; even earned a Silver Star for heroic action that had saved the life of several of his brothers.

*"I'll videotape anything I goddamn well please on my own property,"* he thought.

He didn't have the camera out today, but he was watching this boy with interest.

*"You're going down that road again, Willie,"* the voice in his head said.

*"All I'm doing is watching,"* he thought to himself. *"I'm a dirty old man, but that's not against the law,"* he rationalized.

The boy, *a young man*, Willie thought, left his bike in the usual parking spot and walked over the berm and proceeded down the path to the swimming hole.

*"He's alone,"* Willie thought to himself.

*"You are going down that road again, Willie,"* the voice in his head said.

Tony walked down the path to the swimming hole but he wasn't really surprised when he didn't find anybody around. He explored the area a little bit; climbed a tree using a makeshift ladder someone had made by nailing planks to the tree trunk. The ladder led to a thrown-together platform someone had built spanning three of the lower branches. *It might be the beginnings of a tree-fort*, Tony thought, but he was distracted by thoughts of where his friend Lance had gone, and his somewhat peculiar nature. In the single day they had spent together, there were moments when Lance seemed like any other kid--willing to smile, excited about cool stuff--but there were other times when he was aloof and detached, kind of... unemotional. There was something about his eyes, too. Sometimes Lance's gaze was glassy, like he wasn't looking at you, but *through* you. It puzzled Tony and he couldn't explain it.

He climbed down from the tree, resigned to wait and see if he would run into Lance on the first day of school. He wondered where Lance's locker might be in the alphabetical arrangement at Central until he realized *I don't even know what his last name is*.

Tony emerged from the wooded area in the place the kids had dubbed Bums Jungle and came out on top of the embankment that marked the entrance. *His bike was gone.* He looked around, confused for a moment, wondering whether he had left it somewhere in the tall grass and he just couldn't see it.

At fourteen, he was in the last moments of his bike-riding life. His mom had already talked about taking him driving on his learner's permit, and he would be able to get his license in two years, but right now, his bike was his only mode of transportation, and Traci lived all the way across town.

He walked down the dirt embankment and wandered sort of aimlessly, looking around, not wanting to admit that his bike was gone. His mom had spent more money on that bike than anything else he could think of, and she was always telling him to lock it up. She was gonna be *pissed*.

He walked over the top of the dike with the thought that someone might have left his bike on the riverbank as a prank, but it wasn't there. He crossed back over the dike and walked toward the house that bordered the entrance to Bums Jungle.

Willie stepped onto his front porch quietly and watched as the young man wandered about his property. His house was the last home on the block, and it was newer than the rest of the homes in the neighborhood. They had knocked down the original 1930s-era home sometime in the sixties and the property owner at the time had built this house in a different orientation to make maximum use of the property. So, while everyone else on the block had a south-facing home, Willie's was oriented in a North-South direction and faced east. His driveway was on the east side of his house, too, and with all the kids parading into the woods behind his house, just looking out his front window forced him to take in a constant stream of unsavory temptation.

*"Damn temptation,"* Willie thought.

*"You're the one who piled that dirt on the path, Willie,"* the voice in his head said.

He told himself it was necessary. When you were digging, you had to have somewhere to pile the dirt, and that back corner of the property was the most convenient place. How was he to know kids who once rode their bikes into the woods would start leaving them on his property instead?

*"Willie, it's too hot,"* the voice said.

"It is pretty hot," Willie said under his breath, and wiped his brow.

*"That's not what I meant and you know it,"* the voice scolded.

Willie remembered this young man from their encounter earlier this summer. There had been too many people around then. Now, he was alone.

*"Like the Bell boy,"* Willie thought.

*"Don't, Willie,"* the voice said.

*"Shut UP!"* Willie thought.

Willie stepped forward and put on his best, friendliest, widest smile.

"Didja lose sumthin?" he asked in his folksiest tone.

Tony looked up and saw the old man standing on his porch. He recognized him as the same guy they'd encountered earlier that summer.

“I think someone stole my bike,” Tony said.

“Awwww, you’re kiddin’” Willie said. “That stinks.”

“Yeah, my mom is gonna kill me,” Tony said.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s gonna happen,” Willie said, and he didn’t.

“Wanna come inside?” he asked. “You can call the cops and have a cold Coke while you wait.”

Tony thought about it for a moment. He scanned the property for his bike; looked at the old man. He was smiling. Offering to help. He looked harmless.

“I tell you,” Willie continued, “You’re not the first one to lose a bike out here, unfortunately. Last young man that had his bike stolen out here used my phone to call the cops and they found it a week later under a bridge across town.” He let the statement hang in the air.

“You had a bike license on it, I hope?” Willie asked.

The local bike patrol, a somewhat unofficial arm of the Minot Police Department, had a habit of coercing local kids to put license stickers on their bikes. “Deputized” representatives of the department would patrol parks and residential neighborhoods on bikes (and sometimes mopeds) and stop local kids to make sure they had a license with a unique serial number on their bike. Tony’s bike had been licensed earlier that year after a bike patrol officer had chased down his group of friends on the bike path by the Roosevelt Park band shell.

“Yeah, it had a license,” Tony said.

“Well there you go,” Willie said. “You call it in and they’ll find it in no time.”

“Okay,” Tony said.

Willie Schmidt opened the door that led from his porch to the dining room and stepped inside. He went to the cupboard and took out two bottles of Coke in ten ounce glass bottles. Tony still stood on the porch.

“Dammit,” Willie said. “I forgot to put more in the fridge.” He took two glasses from the cupboard, added ice cubes, and poured the Cokes. His back was turned to Tony.

“Don’t let all the bugs in,” Willie said.

Tony stepped inside and closed the screen door. The dining room was a mess of dirty dishes, newspapers, magazines and videotapes. The fixtures were all covered in a faux-woodgrain veneer that clashed with the harvest gold appliances. Willie turned, extended his arm, and offered a glass of pop to Tony.

“Thanks,” Tony said and scanned the room for a phone.

“What’s your name, son?” Willie asked.

“I’m Tony,” he said.

“I’m Willie,” he said.

“Yeah, I remember,” Tony replied.

Willie smiled and took a big drink from his glass and swallowed.

“Ahhh,” he said. “There is just nothing better than an icy cold pop on a hot day. Am I right?” Willie asked.

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” Tony said and took a drink.

“Hey, you wanna see something neat?” Willie asked.

“I better call the police about...” Tony began.

“Yeah, of course,” Willie interrupted, “We’ll do that in just one sec, but let me show you this. It’s really cool,” he said.

Willie led Tony to a display case in the hall that contained a large collection of knives and edged weapons. The case had lights built into the top, and each weapon was brilliantly illuminated. Willie pulled a cluster of keys attached to a spring loaded dispenser on his belt and opened the glass doors as Tony took another drink of his Coke.

The old man removed a knife from the case and held it up for the young man to examine. It was a rather non-descript knife among the many weapons in the case. Tony blinked a couple times and tried to focus on the knife, but he felt kind of funny.

“I took this off a dead biscuit-head at Inchon in 1950,” Willie said, grinning.

“Wow,” Tony said, nervous. “Um, where’s your phone?” he asked.

“Of course,” Willie said. He put the knife back in the case and locked the door. He led Tony back into the dining room and opened a door.

“It’s downstairs,” Willie said, and gestured to the stairwell.

Tony was confused. He looked down the stairwell and he could see a flesh-colored phone hanging on the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

“You don’t have a phone up here?” Tony asked, perplexed. He felt dizzy.

“Just the cordless,” Willie said, pointing. “But I accidentally broke the antenna. Doesn’t work anymore.”

The handset of a cordless phone, with a broken stub where the telescoping chrome antenna used to be, rested on the telephone stand.

Tony watched as the words came out of Willie’s mouth, but everything sounded weird; like he was underwater or something. His head was swimming and darkness started to press in from the corners of his eyes. *What is happening to me?*

“Go on,” Willie said. “Call the police.”

Tony looked down the stairwell again. He didn’t think he could make it down the stairs without falling. He looked at the glass of Coke in his hand. As if in slow motion, it slipped from his grasp and tumbled to the floor.

“Go on,” Willie said, but it sounded like he was a thousand miles away.

Tony felt a hand in the middle of his back and there was the momentary sensation of being weightless. He floated, *flew* through the air, saw the bottom of the stairs approaching fast, and then it was black.

## Chapter Eight

It was almost pitch black when he came to. Tony lied crumpled at the bottom of a stairwell. A red, ragged gash over one eye oozed blood into his eye socket and down his cheek. He was groggy and didn't understand where he was.

He looked around in the darkness but saw nothing recognizable. Then he noticed the flesh-colored phone hanging on the wall over his head, and it all started to come back to him. His bike, the drink, and the rest of it. He could see the thin rectangle of light that outlined the cellar door at the top of the steps. Willie's shadow occasionally blotted out the light on the other side.

Tony scanned the basement again, looking for an escape. The windows were high on the wall, small, and there were bars over them. The light outside was dim.

*"How long have I been out?"* he wondered.

He put his hands against the stair landing where he had come to rest and attempted to push himself up to a sitting position. A sharp pain shot through his left wrist and knew it must be broken.

"Oww," he said. It came out louder than he intended and he immediately regretted it.

He looked back to the top of the steps but saw no sign of an approach from his captor. Carefully, he managed his way into a sitting position. He gathered his feet, leaned against the wall, and shimmied himself into a standing position against the dirty concrete cellar wall. With his right hand, he removed the phone receiver from the hook and put it to his ear. There was no dial tone. He cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder and then tapped the phone hook several times, allowing it to spring back, hoping to hear something. There was nothing.

Quietly, he descended the last three steps to the cellar floor and began to search for a way out. A bowl with something moldy in it rested on a small wooden table that had been pushed against one wall. There was a dirty blue and white striped mattress on the floor.

*"I'm not the first kid to end up down here,"* Tony thought.

At the far end of the room there was a heavy wood door. It scraped against the floor when Tony tried to open it and he took pains to lift up on it as he opened it to mute the scraping sound. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see a sliver of light on the wall as Willie opened the door and came down to kill him (or worse), but he had apparently not alerted the old man to his consciousness.

He managed to get the heavy door open far enough to see inside--it was the old coal chute. There was a small set of steps, and two heavy wood doors formed the ceiling. Tony wedged himself into the opening and carefully pushed on one door. The door began to rise and for just a moment, Tony thought he was about to escape. His heart sank when the door stopped. He relaxed his legs, relieved the pressure on the door, then pushed again, as hard as he could without making too much noise. The door would only open about two inches. If he had been able to see the other side, he would see the shiny padlock the old man had installed with a heavy-duty hasp.

He crouched, slipped his fingers under the edge of the door and allowed the weight of the heavy doors to rest on his knuckles. He curled his fingers a bit and was able to raise the door enough to see outside.

A yellow yard light illuminated Willie Schmidt's back yard and there was a six-foot privacy fence all the way around the perimeter. Tony's bike was leaned up against a shed. Right next to it, a distinctive green Schwinn with one yellow mag wheel and one black.

"Son of a bitch," Tony muttered under his breath.

Tony let the door down slowly and retreated from the coal chute.

*"I have to find a way out of here,"* he thought.

He walked back toward the stairwell, determined to find a way to escape the old man's prison. In the dark, he failed to see the makeshift toilet Willie had supplied his former prisoner, a galvanized steel bucket, lying on the floor by the mattress. Tony's foot kicked it and the bucket clattered across the floor. Heavy footsteps tromped across the ceiling over Tony's head.

"Shit," he said, as he feverishly searched for a weapon.

The door opened at the top of the stairwell and Tony saw a sliver of light illuminate the wall. The little bit of extra light, tiny as it was, revealed a mop in the corner, near a stain on the concrete floor. Tony bolted for the mop with no time to consider that the stain looked like blood. He grabbed it as footsteps began to descend the stairs. He held one end of the handle with his good hand and braced the mop head against the floor. He raised his left foot and stomped down hard on the mop handle, tweaking his ankle. The mop handle broke and Tony felt a stab of pain shoot up the outside of his leg. He toppled to the ground and the mop handle skittered away.

Willie was almost down the steps and just turning to face the young man when Tony regained his feet, got hold of the wooden handle, and stood to face his captor.

"Well, you've been a busy bee down here, haventcha?" Willie said.

"You killed Jonah," Tony said, angry, clenching his weapon.

"Figured that out all on your own, didja?" Willie asked.

"Why?" Tony hissed.

"Well, that is the question," Willie said, "isn't it?"

"Why does a snake eat a mama bird's eggs?" he questioned.

"Why does a lion eat baby zebras and water buffalo?" he asked and stepped closer to Tony, who clenched the mop handle and made no attempt to hide it.

"It's because it's in their NATURE," he said, emphasizing the last word. He pretended to lunge at Tony as he said it, then chuckled through an evil, toothy grin. Tony retreated two steps and circled to the left, trying to find a way to the stairwell.

"You gonna hit me with that, Tony?" Willie asked, motioning to the wooden handle.

"You're sick," Tony said. "He was a helpless little kid."

The expression on Willie's face became one of acknowledgement.

"I AM sick," he said. "Been this way as long as I can remember. I'm a dirty old man. Sorry. Nothing personal."

With the last sentence, the old man lunged at him, for real this time. Tony swung the mop handle with every ounce of strength he could muster. It glanced off Willie Schmidt's shoulder and caught him in the temple. The old man went down hard.

Tony wasted no time and limped for the stairwell with a broken left wrist and a twisted left ankle, the mop handle still in his hand. He looked back as he began to climb the stairs and Willie was barely moving, on the floor, groaning.

At the top of the stairs Tony struggled to get his bearings. He ran for the door in the dining room. It was secured with a keyed-lock the old man had installed himself. He dropped the mop handle and pulled on the door as hard as he could but it wouldn't budge, and his injured wrist and ankle weren't helping. He could hear Willie coming up the stairs. Tony bolted for the living room and found the front door also locked with a key--a heavy deadbolt barred the front entry.

A large picture window looked out over the driveway. Tony shoved a lamp on the floor, grabbed the small end table where it had been sitting, and raised it over his head. He was about to smash the window and make his escape when Willie raced into the room and tackled him. The end table crashed down on top of them as Willie's momentum carried them both into his home bar, which tipped. Alcohol bottles fell out on the floor and smashed.

"You little bastard," Willie yelled, "I'm gonna enjoy killing you."

Tony managed to scramble away, got to his feet, and grabbed the fireplace poker from the hearth next to the picture window. Willie was on his feet and already coming at him as Tony raised the poker and swung it over his head, shattered the light fixture in the ceiling which exploded in a shower of sparks, and smashed the curved point of the poker down on the old man's head.

The sparks ignited the spreading pool of alcohol under a broken bottle of brandy and Willie cried out in pain as the fire licked at his bare flesh.

Tony turned to run but hesitated when he saw Lance standing in the living room. Willie reflexively recoiled from the flame and struggled to one knee, his head bleeding from the poker and a knot growing on his head where Tony had hit him.

"Lance?" Tony asked. "*What are you doing here?*" he wondered.

"We have to get out of here," he said, but Lance didn't even acknowledge him. It was as if he were catatonic; unmoving and not speaking. He had that look about him again. Tony had seen it before, but this was somehow more significant, in a way Tony couldn't put his finger on. He looked older or maybe bigger, or both.

"Where'd you come from, young man?" Willie chided as he struggled to his feet, but Lance gave no answer. His eyes were glassy--not focused *on* Willie but looking *through* him.

"I'll get to you soon enough," Willie said as the flames from the fire began to climb the wall.

"C'mon," Tony yelled, "There's gotta be a back door," and took off as fast as he could on one good leg, through the dining room and down the hall.

Lance did not follow. His eyes began to glow; a burning red hue that matched the growing fire. Willie was not sure what he was seeing; an illusion from the fire?

“*That blow to the head must have done a number on your noggin, Willie,*” the voice in his head said as the old man raced-off in pursuit of his captive.

Tony arrived at the display case of edged weapons. He knew he had only seconds to spare before Willie came around the corner, and he made an instantaneous decision--*he would make a stand.* This had gone far enough.

With one elbow, he smashed the thin glass on the front of the case and reached for a short sword hanging near the top of the display. He had it in his hand for only a moment when Willie rounded the corner, into the hallway. He stopped at the opposite end of the hallway and they faced-off like gunfighters in the old west, Willie backlit by the growing fire. He was holding a nickel-plated handgun.

“It didn’t have to come to this,” he said. “We were just gonna have a little fun.”

“You’re a sick FUCK,” Tony yelled, and spittle flew from his lips.

“Now, now,” Willie said. “Such language.”

“I’m afraid this little interaction has gone too far for us to play the usual games,” Willie continued as smoke began to roll from the dining room into the hallway.

“So, our time has come to an end,” he said, and cocked the pistol.

A dark shape moved behind Willie and blotted out the light from the growing fire. As Tony’s eyes adjusted to the wavering light, he thought it looked like a hooded form. The figure in the hood had glowing red eyes that illuminated its face.

“*It’s Lance,*” Tony thought. He was sure of it.

A deep, guttural growl came forth from the thing... from Lance, and Willie spun around to face a terrifying thing he could not explain. Had it grown? Was that even possible? The questions raced through Willie’s mind and he was momentarily transfixed. The thing *did* grow, and its countenance changed, from that of a young boy named Lance to a rough, unkempt, ghastly-looking brute; a weathered, beastly man with skin like leather.

Willie screamed and the thing’s red eyes began to flash like strobes of hellfire. Willie pointed his handgun and fired, again and again, but the thing, now almost seven feet tall and holding a staff of some kind, was unfazed.

Tony rushed forward with the short sword in his right hand, raised it, and swung it down with all his might. Willie wheeled-around just in time to see his captive's attack. The blade connected with the old man in the soft, fleshy part of his collar, between his shoulder and his neck, and sliced five inches deep into his torso.



He ran back the other way. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He crashed through the foliage and stumbled into a clear pool in the midst of a marsh. He didn't recognize his reflection in the pool. His face was gaunt and his cheeks sunken against his skull. Dark circles ringed both of his eyes. His left shoulder was an oozing, bleeding, gaping wound. He *was* one of those horrible, tortured things.

"No!" he screamed and bounded out of the pool, running away, hoping to leave his nightmare behind.

The tortured, undead things were closing in from every direction. They looked as terrible as he did, disfigured with every wound a person could imagine. He ran, desperate to get away, caught in a nightmare he did not understand.

Willie crested a rise in the forest, and in the valley below, he saw a river. It was the widest river he had ever seen, the color of blood, and it ran as far as he could see in both directions. Thousands of the terrible, tortured things swarmed and writhed over the landscape. They roamed the riverbank, fighting and thrashing and attempting to climb over one another to board a boat at the river's edge. The hooded shape stood in the boat with his staff. He was a rough and impossibly strong seaman in a red-brown robe of heavy cloth. His staff was a pole for navigating his boat across the river, but he used it to thrash all who attempted to board his boat without approved passage, severing limbs and flinging interlopers into the blood-red river.

Willie knew this story. It was the story of Charon from Greek mythology--he was the Ferryman who ushered the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron into the underworld. Those who didn't have a coin for passage were damned to wander the riverbank, *this nightmarish riverbank*, for a hundred years.

Willie ran down to the river's edge and fought and scratched his way to the front as The Ferryman shoved off and began to take his boat across the river.

"Wait!" Willie shouted. "Please! Take me!"

Voices all around him repeated his cries in mocking tones. *Please. Take me.* Willie searched his person, desperate to find a coin. He reached into his pockets and pulled them inside-out. He had no possessions.

"Gotta pay the Ferryman for passage," the shape said, pointing at him as he piloted his craft away from shore.

"Pay the Ferryman!" voices screamed from the crowd of undead, tortured things, and then they swarmed Willie like a horde of insects on a dead animal carcass, punching, kicking, tearing and biting at his flesh.

## Chapter Ten

The sky was illuminated in shades of purple and red and orange; dawn was about to arrive. Fire trucks and police cars were parked in front of the William Schmidt residence and the block was a beehive of activity. Firemen worked on extinguishing the fire in the Schmidt home with powerful arcs of water. Neighborhood residents gawked from across the street, corralled at a distance by yellow police tape that read “CRIME SCENE. DO NOT CROSS.”

Police investigators came and went through a gate in the privacy fence that circled Willie Schmidt’s back yard. A detective with a notepad pointed to an area of freshly-turned earth, about the size of an eleven-year-old child, near the shed in the back yard.

In the driveway, Jonah Bell’s parents were sobbing in the grass, just a few feet from the distinctive green Schwinn with one yellow mag wheel and one black, which the detectives had found in William Schmidt’s yard. News traveled fast in a small town like Minot, and Jonah’s family had arrived at the scene just minutes after the authorities.

Tony sat in the back seat of a squad car, the door open, the interior dome light on.

The detective in the front seat wrote something on his clipboard, then turned to face Tony and said, “Now tell me, who is this Lance person you keep talking about?”