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KUKULKAN



CHAPTER ONE.

John felt the knot in his stomach tighten as he crossed the invisible line that marked the towns border, he eased up on the gas peddle and brought the ford to an almost snail pace.

He'd been dreading this moment, putting it off for weeks. Yet he knew when he received the news of Mary's death that he'd have to go back to the house. He'd thought of a hundred and one reasons not to come back, but for all the reasons, he knew he would.

He hadn't been in any rush, not until that jumped up young son of a bitch started throwing his weight around, and decided to sack him. Well he'd seen it coming for weeks now, so no job, no flat.

So here he was, going back to Wales to claim his childhood home. Already the nightmares were rushing back, no matter how hard he tried to think of something else, they kept on rearing up, challenging him to deny them. He felt the sweat stand out on his forehead, and quickly wound down the window, letting the cold air in to claim its prize.

As he drove into town, he was surprised at just how little had changed. He'd been gone for over twenty years, but looking round the place it was as though he'd never left. He'd kept in touch with Mary over the years, but he'd never been back to visit her, what with his job taking him here there and everywhere, well he just hadn't been able to find the time.

Virtualventures

He felt a pang of guilt, and quickly told himself that he'd stop for food later. He thought about Mary. She'd had her own life; she didn't have to take him in. Maybe she thought that being his mothers sister meant it was her duty to give him a home after his parent's death. Well he'd never know now. He couldn't remember much about his mother and father, and when he'd asked Mary, all she wools say was that they had died in an accident, and that was that.

As he pulled up outside the house, he was dismayed at the state of the place. He hadn't been expecting a palace, but the place looked almost derelict. The thought of driving off and finding a comfortable hotel dangled in front of him, but he brushed it aside. He knew that that would be just running away again. This time, like it or not, he was going to have to stand up to the nightmares. He looked up at the house and sighed, "that house is the perfect setting for any nightmares," he mumbled.

No sooner had he opened the car door, when there was an almighty crash, and all heaven opened up. He made a quick decision to leave his case in the car boot, and made a dash for the front door. It was only a matter of a few yards. But by the time he reached the front porch, he was completely drenched. He fished out the key, stabbed at the lock, and after a few swift kicks to the bottom of the door, he finally got it open.

That was when the smell hit him. He never carried a hanky chief, so he pulled his jumper up over his mouth and nose, and dived for the nearest window. He slipped on something soft but managed to keep his balance, glancing down he saw the remains of a

half eaten bird, he felt the bile rise in his throat, and swallowed hard cringing at the sour taste. He threw the two large windows open as wide as they would go. Not caring that the rain came pouring in. It might wash some of this crap away, he thought.

As he looked around the room he was suddenly aware of the whole carpet that seemed to be alive and wriggling, only it wasn't the carpet. There must be at least fifty bloody cats in the room and, judging by the sound coming from upstairs, he guessed that there was probably the same number up there.

It took a couple of hours, and a few bites and scratches, but John managed to rid the house of all the cats. And the cat remains. He'd broke out into a sweat as the bloody cats kept leaping back through the windows no sooner had he thrown them out, so he had had to close the windows and suffer the smell.

He took a good look round the house, going from room to room, every room he entered just seemed to get worse, and it was a right dump. It might have been decent once, but that must have been a long long time ago. He guessed that most of the damage had been done by the cats, and judging from the mess, they must have taken up residence long before Mary died.

"Well they won't be coming back in a hurry," he laughs. After he'd thrown them out they had ganged up on the front lawn and made a god awful din like a demented banshee. John had found an old hosepipe, and gone charging out, screeching at the top of his voice, and soaking every cat in sight.

It was strange, they'd sat out in the pouring rain not giving a damn, but the sure didn't like being soaked by the hose, strange. John had once heard that if you threw water over a cat, then it wouldn't come back. He didn't know how true this was, so he would just have to wait and see.

He hadn't noticed the twilight creeping in while he was busy with the cats, and back in the house the room had grown quite dark. But even so, it still didn't look, or smell much better.

Just as he switched the light on there was a heavy knock on the door. Peering round the curtain he saw the police car parked almost on top of his own car. He was in two minds to pretend that he wasn't in, but then he figured that the cop must have witnessed the light going on.

Opening the door a crack, John looked at the fat police officer, taken him in head to toe.

"Can I help you?" John enquired.

"Well sir, maybe you can. I was driving past when I saw the ca--"

"I know, and you thought the place was being burgled," John butted in.

"Would you tell me who you are, and what you are doing here," the cop asked sharply.

"I'm John Lowe, and, well i guess i live here." The cop stared at him hard. Shit, John thought, I've got off to a great start here. Suddenly the cops face softened and a broad smile spread across his lips.

"Hell I remember you now, your Jennies boy."

John was startled; he hadn't heard his mother's name in a long time. He studied the man in front of him and suddenly realised that a face from the past was smiling back at him from behind the old sagging flesh, and mop of grey hair, but he just couldn't recall the name.

The cop seemed to read his mind, "you wouldn't remember me, I'm sergeant Jones, well back then I was just a o.k., I visited Mary a lot, and I guess I kind of watched you grow up."

As the man talked the memories came rushing back. The picnics, the days by the seaside, the fish and chips.

The smell filled his mind. Hell o.k. Jones! Imagine not remembering him. Still the years had taken their toll, and the name, well it wasn't surprising he'd forgotten it.

John shot out his hand, and shook the old man's fleshy fingers warmly.

"I'm sorry I err -- hey, it's good to see you, please come in," he spluttered, the words falling over each other.

"I'm in a bit of a rush now, but I'll see you soon, real soon."

John watched as sergeant Jones drove off. Strange, he thought, old, Jones had made a hasty exit, maybe he'd felt a little awkward after all these years, he knew that he did. He returned to the front room and dropped heavily into the old armchair.

Glancing round the dirty room, he was glad the officer hadn't taken up his invitation, shit; he really would have to do some decorating.

He was surprised at how easily he'd accepted the idea of living in the house again. After all it was only an hour or so ago that he'd dreaded the thought of even entering the place, and had been ready to run off to the nearest motel room. He wondered just what it was that he'd been so scared of.

He could remember the nightmares he'd had after his parents' deaths, but hell, they were only nightmares, and after all he was only nine years old at the time, what could he expect?

He ignored the fact that the nightmares had tormented him until he turned eighteen, and how he couldn't wait to leave the house, and that his first night away from the place was the first decent night's sleep he'd had. He'd had no dreams, as far as he knew, that night.

He'd always been a weak and scrawny kid, but as soon as he'd left home he'd begun to grow stronger, and bigger, it was as though a heavy weight he'd been carrying had been taken from him and he could stretch and stand tall without being obstructed.

He'd often thought of coming back and showing those school bullies a thing or two. But no matter how big and strong he'd become, he knew that he wouldn't be returning. That was until now.

He yawned, and glanced at his watch, nine o'clock, how long had he been sitting there? He'd been driving all day, and he realised now just how tired he really was. Maybe the place won't look so bad after a good night's rest, he lied to himself.

He knew that if he didn't make a move now, he'd end up spending the night on the armchair, and that prospect didn't much appeal to him.

He was woken by the sound of somebody being murdered. At least that was what it sounded like to him. Rubbing sleep from his eyes he pounded over to the window. The rain had stopped, and the night sky was quite clear. John could make out at least ten cats, sitting on the front lawn in a circle, heads to the heavens, and wailing for all they were worth. Well the hose job had worked on most of them, he thought.

He grabbed his boot up off the floor and slung it at the little feline Stonehenge, regretting his actions at once. It had always looked good on the cartoons, but he'd only had the one pair of boots with him, as he'd left all the stuff in the car. He was in half a mind to leave it out there until the morning and get right back into bed, but knowing his bloody luck the rain would come back down twice as hard as earlier on.

He pulled on his jeans, and cursed as another button came off his well worn denim shirt. He'd had it for years now, but still thought he looked good in it. Bare footed he made his way down the cold stairs.

Before retrieving the boot, he lumbered into the front room and stole a glance at the dusty grand father clock that stood to attention by the old black and white television set. It was only half past four. A fleeting thought crept into his head, either the clock was electric, or somebody must have been here recently to wind the thing up. And seeing as though he'd had to switch the electric on when he'd arrived, it only left the latter.

He was still half a sleep so he let the thought creep out again. He'd give it a bit more thought in the morning. If he remembered.

Outside as he stooped to pick up his boot, he had a feeling of being watched. He swung round quickly to find a large, a very large black cat, staring at him. Apparently this one didn't scare so easily.

"Get out of here, you mangy git," he hissed. Nothing, it didn't move a bloody inch.

After a few more hisses and curses, and other useless efforts to get rid of the cat, John gave up and hurried back inside. The cold November night had chilled deep into his bones. He switched on the tatty, two bar electric heater, relieved when he saw the orange glow appear, and sat almost on top of it, soaking up its welcoming warmth.

When John opened his eyes again it was almost nine. The fire was still going strong, and he could feel the sticky sweat gripping his cloths, making them cling to his body. He sniffed and wrinkled his nose at the pungent odour. A shower was in order.

The shower wasn't a modern affair, just a rubber hose connected to the bath taps, and although he hadn't left the water long enough to heat up, he still felt refreshed and a whole lot better, the cat incident almost forgotten.

Slipping on his coat he went out into the cool morning air. He took a couple of large gulps. Hell, it really did taste different from the city air.

He looked up at the sky, apart from a couple of small black clouds, it was clear and didn't look like much chance of rain. He strolled over to the car and pulled his case from the boot, maybe a change of cloths wouldn't go a miss. A movement from across the

narrow lane caught his attention. In the hedge sat the black cat, crouched down low and staring straight at him.

John slowly made his way towards it. The cat wasn't in the least bit scared of him. When he was about two yards away, the cat got up, stretched, and vanished into the undergrowth.

John turned away, but then turned quickly back. In the over grown hedge, he could see a gate. He couldn't remember a gate ever being there, but that didn't mean there never was one, it could have been put there after he'd left. He pulled and tugged at the brown branches until he could see over the gate into the field beyond,

There was a mist swirling about three feet over the entire field. Strange, he hadn't noticed a mist anywhere else. As he stared into it, dark shapes started to form and then dance across the field towards him. He pulled his head back sharply, blinked rapidly, the shapes disappeared. So did the mist, completely, no sign of it ever being there. John shuddered and walked quickly back to the house.

He went into the kitchen and searched, but wasn't surprised when he found nothing in the way of food, not even a rusty old tin of beans. He thought about given breakfast a miss, but his belly woke up and argued. His belly won hands down. He'd have to drive into town and buy a few things.

As he drove through the town, he checked the sidewalks, not only for a place to eat, he also scrutinised the faces of the passers by for any long lost childhood friends. Hell who was he kidding, as if he'd remember anyone after twenty years? And who'd remember him after twenty years? Sergeant Jones hadn't, well at least not the face, only the name.

Funny, he thought, he never had known Jones's first name. When he was a kid you was always expected to call the adults Mr this or Mrs that, yet they could go right ahead and call you by your first name. Even when he'd reached his teens Pc Jones was always Pc Jones.

He spied a small cafe, pulled up a side street and parked the car, making sure there wasn't any double yellow lines.

He ordered a complete fry up and a black coffee, and fell into a seat by the window to wait.

He looked round the room, there were only two other customers. Two very large blokes, lorry drivers? maybe a sign of good food, after all John thought, it was only a small town, not a route for heavy traffic, so why else would lorry drivers leave there route to come here, if they were lorry drivers. Must be good food he decided, and the rumble from his belly reminded him just how hungry he was. The sound of footsteps woke him from his thoughts, and he looked up and smiled at the steaming plate coming his way.

The food was good, and after paying his bill he strolled back to the car contented. He reached into his pocket for the keys the thought, what the hell, I've nothing better to do, and I might as well take a look around the place.

A few of the shops had changed, but some, like the ironmongers, were just as he remembered them. As a kid he recalled, he bought the pellets for his airgun from the ironmongers. O, I Mr Wilkes ran the place he remembered, surprised that the name had sprung so easily to mind.

He stepped into the shop and his heart sank. It might look the same from the outside, but it was a lot different inside. A spotty faced youth looked up as he entered and asked if he could help him. From the tone of his voice, he hoped it wouldn't be necessary; John didn't upset him, and left.

He'd only been in the shop for a couple of minutes at most, but in that time the heavens had opened up once more. That was one thing he remembered about Buckley, it always seemed to rain. He pulled his collar up and dashed out into the street. He was soaked through in no time, so he gave up running and slowly walked back to the car. By the time he got back to the house he was shivering uncontrollably. The car heater had done nothing to take away the chill. He changed into dry cloths and turned on the old TV set. It seemed to take forever to warm up, but as the screen cleared he saw that a "carry on," film was just starting. He could do with a hot drink inside to chase away the chill, but decided that he'd wait for the break in the film before he made one, although he'd seen the picture a hundred times before he still didn't want to miss any of it. Sid James played a really good part in this farce about a highway man.

John had to wait for the end of the film before he had a chance to make his drink. When he'd switched the set on, he hadn't noticed that it was showing on B.B.C, not that he minded, he always thought that the breaks spoiled films, and they were showing a double bill, so he had just enough time to get the drink and settle down before the next one started as the credits rolled by.

While he was waiting for the endless credits to finish, John glanced out the window. It was as though someone had painted them a matt black when he wasn't looking. The night sky had reached down and put an end to another day.

As he switched the light on a slight sound from the window caught his attention. He turned and his breath caught for an instant. There were two green eyes peering in. It took him a moment to realise what they were, the bloody cat was back. John pulled the curtains tightly shut; he had no intentions of playing games with it tonight.

After watching a couple of hours of really crap game shows, he'd had enough. He got out of the chair and switched the television set off, deciding that an early night was in order. Although he hadn't really done anything all day, he was still out like a light as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He was in the field, the mist was rolling round everywhere, but he didn't feel the cold. A strange moaning sound seemed to be coming from every direction. As John watched, the mist grew dark shapes, and these shapes took on the form of people. And these human forms were closing in on him.

He felt the sweat drip from his brow as they drew in closer. He wanted to run, but his legs weren't having any of it. He was rooted to the spot; all he could do was swing from the hip and watch as they came closer.

The nearest form emerged from the mist directly in front of him, and John could see his features. At least he thought it was a "he".

The creature had a skull with hair hanging in tatters, and matted in these tatters was wet grass and earth. It looked as though it had just dug itself out of its own grave. It stopped just in front of John, and stared at him through eyeless sockets. He had no eyeballs, but John was still drawn to them. As he stared he realised that there was something moving around inside the empty cavities. Then hundreds of worms fell out like they were being put through one of those old mincing machines.

John tore his gaze away and swung round to be confronted by more of the zombies. Each one he looked at seemed to be worse than the last. As he watched in horror, they raised their arms and moved in on him.

He let out a scream, but no sound left his lips. He tried again, nothing.

Then they were on him, wet stumpy fingers clawing at his flesh. He tried to fight them off, but was revolted just by the feel of them.

Then he noticed it. He hadn't noticed it before, but the smell was unbelievable, it was so bad it seemed to be burning the back of his throat.

John felt the bile rise, he clasped his mouth firmly shut, but he could still feel it rising.

Suddenly a zombie appeared so close, it was as though it was trying to kiss him. This was all too much for John and he could no longer hold back and the vomit came gushing forth.

The creature howled as it was hit full force in the face. And then it was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

He shot upright, beads of sweat stood out on his forehead; he quickly glanced round the room, taking in every detail. In the dark he could just make out the outline of the old oak wardrobe standing alone in the corner. In the opposite corner there was a small desk and chair, and these, together with the single bed, was the complete contents of the room. John had considered sleeping in Mary's room, but it had felt right to use "his" room, or what had once been his room. He wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, and slumped back down into the pillow, His heartbeat slowed back down to a normal pace, and he drew in deep breaths to try and calm the pounding inside his skull.

The field. It came rushing back, it had seemed so real. His skin started to crawl as he recalled the touch of those, those things, as they tried to get a hold of him. He shuddered, relieved, slightly, that it was only a dream, just a dream.

But it wasn't just a dream; it was "THE" dream. He remembered it from his childhood. It hadn't changed, the only thing that had changed was he, and he'd aged. But the dream was the same.

Suddenly his hand touched something wet and sticky, he drew it away quickly, so it wasn't all a dream.

He threw back the puke-covered sheets and sighed, they had smelled of damp and decay before, and he could live with that, but not with the sickly smell as well.

He'd spent two nights in the house, so why had the nightmares come last night and not the night before?

John answered his own question, because you had spent the night before sleeping in the chair. Could it be that easy? No of course it couldn't, it was just that he had been so much more tired the previous night.

Today he resolved, he would do something more useful than just sit round watching telly. But what? Try and find a job for a starter.

He couldn't live forever on what Mary had left him, or the small pay off he'd had from his last employment. He was willing to try any kind of work, but what he really wanted was another job as a private detective, he was good at that, really good. He didn't always play fair, then again, who did?

He recalled the look on that young snotty nosed brat. Ever since he had taken over the firm after his father's death, John had known his days were numbered. And if he thought about it, being sacked was really a blessing, he didn't like John, and John couldn't stand being in the same room as him. John smiled inwardly, the kid had really freaked. He'd called John into the office, and before the door had a chance to close, the kid had torn right into him!

John couldn't understand what all the fuss was about, he'd been following this guy for weeks, and although he knew he was having an affair, the fellow was too smart to be caught out.

So all he had done was hire a call girl to set the guy up for Christ sake. Where was the harm in that? So what if she wasn't the woman the bloke had been having it off with, the wife wasn't to know. She had hired him to find out if her husband was having an affair, and he had found out, and given her proof like she had wanted. Yea, she wasn't the woman he had been seeing, but he never turned his nose up at the call girl, so in his book, he was just as guilty doing it with her.

How the hell was he to know the bloody guy would come clean, and even take the woman to meet his wife? He was supposed to deny everything, not bloody confess. And the guy was smart, yea too smart, and it didn't take him long to realise that the only way John could have got the pictures was by setting him up in the first place.

So in to the office they came to complain, and what do you know, the boss's son just happened to be acquainted with the couple personally. And although he did not admit as

much, he knew the call girl just as personally. So that was that, the jerk had said that out of respect for his father, on account that he had liked John, he wouldn't just sack him. But there was no way he was going to let him stay, so John had been bought off. And cheap. A couple of grand for seventeen years bleeding service, he had had to contain himself from telling him what he could do with it, but he knew if he had, the creep would do it, and he would end up with bloody nothing!

John knew that the job centre would be a waste of time, after all, which had ever seen adverts in an employment office for a private detective. He'd seen adverts in some daily tabloids telling you how you can make a living as a private eye, and they make it sound oh so exciting, but the catch, and the least exciting part, is the amount of money you have to outlay in the beginning.

He had often thought about setting up on his own, after all he knew the game inside out, but he never had the nerve to make the move. Maybe now was the time to make that move, after all, what had he to lose?

"Right that's it, that's what I'll do" he confided to his reflection in the bathroom mirror, "I'll go into town and see if there's any office space to rent."

He was pleased with this notion, and felt a lot better now he had a purpose. It would leave a large hole in his savings, but hell, what else was money for? He splashed the icy water on to his face and felt the chill charge, and chased the cobwebs away. He cleaned his teeth, and threw on a clean set of cloths. He was starting to feel good. Deep down he knew that this time he would beat the nightmares. But at the same time he had a bad feeling that there was more to the nightmares than them being just bad dreams. And although he was sure he was going to win, he just couldn't shake the bad feeling, and this scared the shit out of him. Oh well, back to the matter in hand, he grinned.

The trip to the estate agent proved quite worth while. He had seen a couple of places that would suit him, and they were both in good locations. He called in at the local papers office and placed an advert offering his service's, and he'd have to wait to see what kind of response he got before deciding if it would be worth his while getting an office, or if it would be best to work from home. After placing the ad, he paid a visit to the super market and bought enough food to feed an army. He may as well eat well if he was going to stay. He also bought a duvet, and a couple of pillows. He had decided the old sheets just were not worth washing. And a duvet made making the bed in the morning a whole lot easier.

He made himself a chicken dinner, which was soon demolished, and settled down, in the old armchair, book in one hand, a glass of wine in the other. He was about to pour his fourth glass when a scratching sound from the window caught his attention. Drawing back the curtain, he saw the black cat perched on the ledge clawing at the glass pane.

John opened the window slightly and went back over to the armchair, watching the cat to see what it would do next, smiling foolishly so as not to scare it. The animal stared

at John through its slanted green eyes before it, at least it seemed to John, scowled, frowned as if in puzzlement, and then slowly made its way into the room. Watching John all the time, it stalked over to the other chair, jumped up and nestled into the cushion. John finished off the last drop of wine, and then got somewhat unsteadily to his feet. Drink had never really agreed with him, but it didn't stop him from trying to persuade it. He was having quite a job keeping his eyes open, and he almost had to crawl up the stairs. It was debatable on whether he was a sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, or if he had fallen asleep before he nose dived onto the bed.

He was in the field again. This time the figures appeared a lot quicker, and before he knew it he was surrounded by the zombies. He twirled round, desperately looking for some way out. But there was no way out, soon he became dizzy and sank to his knees. This was the signal for the monsters to move in.

He cringed as he felt their clammy hands clawing at his body. This is it, he thought, I'm going to be ripped to pieces and eaten alive.

But they didn't rip him to pieces, or eat him alive. He had all ways woken up at this stage of the nightmare in the past, and he tried desperately to wake himself now. But he wouldn't wake, and this time it didn't feel like a dream, this time he felt as though it might really be happening.

He could feel the hot sting of the zombie's putrid breath against his cheek. He waited for the rotten teeth to bite into his flesh. But it didn't bite; instead it seemed as if it was talking to him, at least trying to talk. He screwed his eyes shut to block out the images, but he could not block out the voices that were coming from all around him.

He couldn't bring himself to open his eyes and look at the pitiful creatures, even though their voices sounded as though they were pleading for his help.

Help them! Help them how? He had no idea what kind of help they were after. Nor, for that matter, did he want to know, he just wanted to be out of there.

He wanted to be as far away from those things as possible, and as far away as possible from their horrible smell of death.

He tried to close his ears to their death ratter ling pleas, but the voices seemed to be coming from inside his head now, and there was no way of escaping them.

"Go away, leave me alone!" He cried through clenched teeth.

But the voices still came, the begging turned into frenzy. John felt as though his head was about to explode, and when he felt the wet sandpaper like tongue on his face he could take it no longer.

He grabbed the zombie and opened his eyes to confront it. He found himself face to face with his startled visitor.

The cat hissed and clawed at his hands. John squealed and dropped the cat, well almost threw the angry moggie to the floor. It flew out of the door without a backward glance.

John was about to go after it, but took one look at his injured hand and thought, to hell with it, after the entire bloody cat had scared him more than he had scared the cat. He got out of bed and staggered, still half asleep, to the bathroom to clean out the wound, noting the rays of sunlight invading the room through the slight gap in the curtains.

After making himself a strong mug of coffee he sank into the chair in the front room and tried to think. The dream, what did it mean? Perhaps nothing? No, it meant something, but what?

He remembered the rotting faces, he had always been afraid of those faces, and it had taken years for him to forget them. And even now, after all these years, he still couldn't bring himself to watch a zombie film, how ever daft that might be.

But last night had been different. Last night, instead of being frightening, they had seemed pitiful; he had even felt sorry for them, kind of. They had asked for help, but what kind of help could he possibly give? He suddenly felt stupid, he was beginning to think of his nightmares as real, and that he was actually in that field last night. A knock on the door brought him back down to earth. He opened the door to be greeted by the smiling sergeant Jones.

"Hello John, I've not called at a bad time have I?"

"Just the opposite," John said warmly, gesturing him in.

"Well I've got the day off, and, err, I was wondering if you still liked to fish?" There was a pleading look in Sergeant Jones's eyes.

Fishing, he hadn't been fishing for years, John realized, and then sighed, "But I haven't got a rod or anything."

"That's okay, I've got two," The policeman chirped, the pleading look even more evident.

"Well in that case, what are we waiting for?" John grinned.

It was the best day John Lowe had had in a long time. He hadn't been fishing since he was a kid, but the memories came flooding back and he remembered how he had always got excited when ever he went. It was another of those childhood memories he'd abandoned when he finally left Buckley. And after all these years he'd been allowed to call the sergeant by his Christian name, Roy. John had never thought of him as a Roy. Although, what a Roy was supposed to look like he wasn't really sure.

He realised that he had always thought of a Roy resembling Roy of the rovers, or Roy Rogers, or even that goody two shoes, Roy Larty from way back in his school days, it

was funny how that Roy had sprung to mind after all these years. God he'd hated that kid.

During the day John had confided in the rugged policeman about his plans to start his own detective business. He had dropped it into the conversation in a light hearted manner, not sure what reaction he would receive, but needing some sort of spring board. The old man thought it wasn't a bad idea, which had surprised John, but at the same time, wasn't sure if there would be much call for his service's in a place like Buckley. But he had also said that he would help him in any way he could, within reason, which really pleased John, having someone on the inside, so to speak, could be a great boost.

Old Roy was a bit disappointed when he learned that John hadn't got into the private eye game by being an ex copper. But he cheered up a little when he found out he was ex army, well it was the next best thing.

John hadn't the heart to tell him that he had only done his basic training and then got out as quick as he could. They had stopped off on the way home for a bite to eat and a couple of pints, and before he knew it, it was getting on for ten o'clock before John arrived home.

He was surprised to see the cat stretched out on the settee, after last night he thought that he had seen the last of it. As he reached out to stroke it the cat hissed out a warning. "Oh I see, I'm good enough to give you a roof over your head, but not good enough to stroke you." John said, faking hurt. The cat settled back, watching him through its one open eye.

Virtualventures

"Well if you're going to be like that I'm off to bed, good night!" John smiled at the motionless cat bowing, and made a gallant exit.

The nightmares came again that night. He tried to block them out but they probed at his mind, sending flashes through his temples as though he was being prodded with a red hot poker.

He came awake, and had to pry his eyes open with his fingers, they felt as though the eyelids had been glued together. The room was still in darkness.

He felt something climbing up his leg, he slowly reached for the old light cord above his head and tugged on it, the whole room was suddenly bathed in a soft yellow glow. And crawling up his leg was the black cat.

Something in the cats eyes made john think of death, and he shuddered, looking into those eyes was like looking into hell itself. The cat dropped off the bed and went over to the door, it turned, looked at John and then drew itself to its full height and let out a deep guttural moan. The moaning got louder and louder until John could take it no more.

He scanned the floor in the yellow gloom for something to throw at it, but could see nothing at hand.

He jumped out of bed and moved towards the moaning beast, as soon as the cat saw John jump out of bed the noise stopped. John glared at it for a moment, and then shook

his head and climbed back into the warm bed, and at that very same moment, the moaning started up again.

"Right!" John yelled, throwing himself out of bed once more. The cat stopped as John's feet touched the floor, and took a few paces back. As John advanced towards the cat, the cat would move away, leaving the same distance between them each time. John had the feeling the cat wanted him to follow it. Was he crazy? He wondered? A dog would act this way maybe, but a cat! All the same he felt that that was what the cat wanted.

He pulled on his jeans and sweatshirt, and started to follow the animal. Downstairs, he leaned over and opened the front door and the cat darted out into the night air. John thought that the entire animal wanted was to be let out. But the cat stopped by the gate and waited.

John slipped his old trainers on, and obliged the beast. He was suddenly aware of the bite of November's teeth. He cursed himself for not having grabbed a coat as well. He looked for the cat, and saw it on the opposite side of the road now. John's heart missed a beat when he realised just where the animal had stopped.

The gate looked like a giant mouth about to swallow the cat. As John hesitated the damn thing started its moaning again.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming," he mumbled, hugging himself against the icy breeze.

As soon as he got within inches of the cat it disappeared under the gate.

"I've just about had enough of this," he grumbled, turning back towards the house. But before he could move a deathly scream broke the night.

At first John thought the animal had been hurt in some way, but then he reflected that no cat could make that kind of sound, no matter how much pain it was in. He found himself turning, his foot seeking out the bottom beam of the gate, they seemed to have taken on a life of their own, because there was no way he wanted to go over that gate.

The climb to the top of the gate took a lifetime, he felt as though time had stopped still, there was no sound and the night breeze had completely gone. He felt as though he was the only thing left alive on planet earth. While he slept the planet must have been invaded by hostile green men and he was the only one they had missed.

He was now balanced on the top beam of the gate, he didn't want to go over, but he knew that he couldn't turn back. As he stared across the field he could see the familiar mist rolling in to meet him. But this time, in the centre of the mist there was a red light that seemed to swell, and then explode into a thousand tiny red glows.

As John watched the red lights they changed into yellow, and then green, and finally black. He didn't know how one could have a black light, but by god he was looking at them, thousands of them. Maybe it wasn't god; he mused, and was surprised that the thought didn't really scare him. He felt his head begin to get light and started to sway. He looked down to his feet, but could see nothing. Nothing but the mists with its black lights beneath him.

He didn't so much jump, as feel that he had been pushed, in any case down he went. And down, down and down.

He knew it was only a matter of four feet to the ground, so why hadn't he landed yet? As he fell he felt icy fingers clawing at his flesh. He heard curses and smelt the foul breath of his tormentors. He was pushed, and beaten until he felt himself break away and an icy breeze wiped the foul smell from his body.

And then he hit the floor. As he lay there he could hear footsteps coming towards him. He opened his eyes and looked up at a young girl. She smiled at him, and as she opened her mouth, earth and rotting teeth fell onto Johns face.

He was grateful to the darkness that rushed into claim him.

CHAPTER THREE.

John opened his eyes slowly. He expected to see the flaking paintwork, and the grubby wallpaper of his bedroom, but instead he saw clouds drifting over his head and smelt the damp earth beneath him.

The dream, the field again, it was only a dream, so what was he doing in the bloody field at- he looked at his watch, at bloody ten to five in the bloody morning. Strange, he thought, he couldn't remember putting his watch on, he always took it off when he went to bed, he had been to bed, hadn't he?

Just when he thought he was getting a hold on the dream, he was now sleepwalking, Jesus, whatever next? He rolled onto his side and for the first time since he had awakened he felt cold. But not only was he cold, but he was completely soaked too. It must have rained in the night, so if it had rained, how in the hell had it failed to disturb him? After all he always thought of himself as a light sleeper.

He rose somewhat unsteadily to his feet. He felt as though he'd been on a week's drunken spree. He had only had a couple though, and they were with food. So he certainly hadn't been intoxicated last night. So why had he just taken up sleepwalking as a pastime? A sneering voice in his head said, "If you did sleepwalk."

"Of course I bloody sleepwalked!" He retorted, annoyed. He shook his head, what the hell was he doing standing, or lying in the middle of a wet field at nearly five in the morning, he scolded himself.

As he swayed towards the gate, the heavens opened up, throwing everything it had at John. This made him get his act together. Taking the gate in one leap, he bounded to the house trying his best to dodge the tennis ball sized water bombs.

Once indoors he stripped off his cloths, grabbed a blanket, switched the electric fire on and sat shivering in the old armchair trying to gather his thoughts.

A picture slowly emerged; he could remember following that damn cat to the field was it a dream or was it real? If it was a dream, then what was he doing in the field? And if it was real, well, was everything he saw real? And what the hell did it all mean, and why was it all happening now? He had all these questions, but no bloody answers!

The thought of just getting the hell out of this place kept springing to mind, but he couldn't be sure the dreams wouldn't follow him. They hadn't followed him last time he'd left, but that was many years ago, besides, he'd never awakened in the field then.

His mind drifted back to his childhood. He had had some happy times in this house. He tried to recall his parents. He could get some sort of an image of his mother, but when attempted to form a picture of his father, all he could get was a very well built body with a cloud of mist for a face. No matter how hard he tried he just couldn't penetrate that veil that obscured his fathers head.

He remembered the fights too, sometimes they were very violent. A cold shiver crawled down his spine; he shuddered and pulled the blanket tighter. They had thought he was asleep, but he lay in bed listening, to scare to move in case he made a noise and then, well not they, his dad had heard him and come up and start hitting him.

The beatings he had taken from his father when he had come home drunk had left scars, mental scars. Scars that for the past twenty years he had put behind him. Was it by coming back that he had re-opened the old wounds, was this his real nightmare?

He tried to remember when the nightmares had first come, he couldn't be sure about the exact time, but he knew it wasn't long after his parent's deaths.

He recalled that at the time, everyone had thought it was strange that he had shown no emotion when hearing of his parent's accident. But after all, he was only nine, and people did show their emotions in different ways.

But John realised, with a chill, that he hadn't felt any sorrow, only relief. A selfish relief. Although he had had some good times, the bad times out numbered them at a hundred to one. It wasn't his mothers fault, she had tried to be loving, but he never forgave her for not sticking up for him when his father beat him black and blue. All she did was stand in a corner and cry. She bloody cried! How the bloody hell did she thinks he felt. Some times he was so badly bruised that he couldn't go to school, and he had loved school.

It was an escape. Oh, he had his fair share of being bullied at school, but no matter how much the kids bullied him, they couldn't compare with his father. He was a real expert.

He felt a tear well up and swell until it burst, and went rolling down his cheek, it hung onto his chin for a moment before falling off. John sniffed, but it was no good, the floodgates had opened and the tears came in their thousands.

He didn't try to stop them now, it felt right, he hadn't wept in a long, long time, in fact if he was honest, he wouldn't be able to say when he had wept last.

His heart had been turned to stone at an early age, and over the years it hadn't melted one bit. Not until now that is, and now that it had finally melted he didn't want to try and stop it.

John slowly eased himself out of the chair, and headed for the stairs. Staggering into the bathroom he steadied himself against the sink, and stared into the mirror. The face glaring back at him looked familiar, but he just couldn't place it. He looked every bit of his thirty eight years. The beatings as a child and the beatings he had suffered in the course of his job had taken their toll. On the whole he looked a lot like an ex boxer. In all the films he had seen, private eyes were always tough, but in real life it just wasn't the case, and he was living proof of that.

He stared into the hard, blue eyes. He didn't like what he saw behind those eyes, what he had become. His gaze dropped to his lopsided nose, a smile curved on his lips as he remembered how he had broken it. The lady had a real good left hook, and even now he could still laugh at the memory. She had been mad enough to kill him, he was only doing his job, and, as he had pointed out, it wasn't him having the affair, her husband had the right to know, after all he had always suspected she only married him for his money, and he had been proved right. She was having an affair with the man she had introduced as her brother. This had been the type of case you found in the movies, and he would always wear the scar to remember it by.

His hair was in tatters and in great need of a stiff brush. He kept meaning to get it cut but always managed to put it off. When it got to untidy he would just tie it in a pony tail. But he hadn't bothered lately as it had become fashionable for trendy well to do's to wear their hair in pony tails, and if one thing could be said about him, that was he was no trendy.

He flexed his muscles, and tried to eject the cold that had found its way deep into his bones, he was now aching in places he didn't know he could. He leaned over and turned the bath taps on; the welcoming steam that rose from the tub was comforting. He watched as the steam slowly covered the mirror, veiling the stranger's face. He took his finger and drew a smile where his mouth was. But even that smile was crooked, he sighed and turned away.

He lay back and let the bath water lap over him. He closed his eyes as the warmth surged through his body. Once more his mind drifted back to his childhood. He could remember creeping out of his room when the arguments got really bad. He recalled seeing his father covered in blood, and his mother yelling, and cursing him. So if she was mad with him and not upset, then he knew the blood couldn't belong to his father, and there were no marks on his mother, so he knew that it wasn't her blood either. John remembered how he had lain awake all night wondering whose blood it could be.

It was a haunting image that had stayed with him a long time. This beast of a man, his father, covered from head to foot in someone else's blood. A sudden realization hit him; it was the following day that his parents had the accident. The memories were becoming clearer. He had been disturbed by the shouting coming from downstairs; he went out onto the landing and could hear their quarrelling. His father had hit the bottle

early that morning and was already drunk. Suddenly the bickering had stopped, and he could hear his mother talking all sweet to his father, this had really confused him. What had happened to bring on the sudden change? She purred that she would like a drive out into the country so they could sort things out. His father had let out some sort of animal laugh and rushed out to the car, with no thought for him what so ever, they never came up to tell him where they were going, they just went. And that was the last time he saw them alive.

He had waited on the landing for hours, he had expected his mother to come up and tell him his dinner was ready. But she wasn't going to be making dinner that day. Nor any other day. The door had burst open and he had got ready to rush down to greet his mother. But it wasn't his mother who came in, it was Mary, his aunt, and with her stood a grim faced policeman. He had felt a lead weight grow in his chest, he didn't need them to say anything, and he knew what had happened.

He had expected to be sent away, he knew it wouldn't be a load to live in the house on his own. But then Mary told him he wasn't going to be sent away, she would come and live in the house with him, and he had felt an overwhelming joy, a feeling he hadn't known in a long time.

It was only a week or so later that the nightmares began. It was the same dream every time. He was in a field, it was late at night, and he could hear a girl screaming. And as he got closer to the sound he could see a young girl dressed in pink pyjamas, on her knees with her hands fastened behind her back, and the head of a dead sheep crudely tied to the top of her own. In front of her a very large man was dancing and chanting some strange words in a strange language. Tied to the top of his head was a very large snakes head with its mouth gaping and huge fangs are glinting in the moonlight. He was dressed in some sort of red overalls. John had seen some similar to these but he couldn't recall where. Hanging off the arms and legs of the man was the rest of the sheep's body parts. And what looked like smaller animals, rats and rabbits and birds, all ripped a part and still bleeding sending splatters of blood around the mans feet as he danced around the cowering girl.

Some of the blood was sprayed over the girl, leaving darker patches on her pink pyjamas. On seeing the blood the man went crazy, his voice rising to a high pitched shriek. John had watched as the girl had slowly lifted her head and turned towards him. He had seen the fear in her eyes as she begged him to help her, but he hadn't been able to move, not that there was anything he could have done anyway.

The crazy man had turned and smiled at him, he knew the face. He had watched in disbelief as the man pulled out a long bladed knife, tugged the girls head back and drew the blade across the exposed flesh. At first John had thought it was a game of some sort, as nothing had happened, the girl had looked alright, and there was only a faint thin red line across her throat. But to his horror the red line grew bigger, and suddenly the girl had another mouth. A mouth that screamed forth a great gush of foaming blood. John had looked deep into the eyes of the madman and had been unable to stop the heart rendering scream that escaped his lips.

looked at was furnished as well, but this one was better located, so he would just have to make the best of it.

He wasn't going to bother with an office at all, but as Roy pointed out, it didn't look to professional working from home. After all, a lot of it is all front, if you look like you're doing well, people are more likely to come to you. If you had a shabby office they would think that you weren't very good at what you do, but if you had a posh office, well---, so John thought to hell with the expense, a few jobs and he would soon earn the money he had outlaid.

The advert in the paper hadn't had any response. Maybe people didn't like getting in touch with just a box number. John asked them to run the advert again, and this time was able to give them his new office telephone number.

He switched the answering machine on and sat at his desk glaring at it, as though if he stared at it long enough then a call would come through. He could just go out and check the machine later, but decided that he didn't really have anywhere else to go. Besides, by hanging around in the office he sort of had a feeling of working.

At around five thirty he'd had enough, pushing himself from the desk he decided to call it a night. Before he reached the door he saw a figure lurking behind the frosted glass. He watched as the figure paced back and forth, as though they were debating with themselves. He was about to snatch the handle when the door opened and in walked a small woman in a long black coat.

The first thing John noticed about her was her long coppery, red hair. He guessed that she was aged around the mid thirties, but she dressed a lot younger. As he stared, the face seemed to look familiar, and then with a sudden shock he realized why it seemed familiar.

It was the girl from his nightmares, the girl whose throat he had seen cut. She was a lot older, but she was the same girl, he was sure of it. The look on her face was the same look she had given him all those years ago. As she advanced towards him, John felt his knees buckle, and then a dark veil covered his eyes before he hit the floor.

When he opened his eyes, he was greeted by the concerned woman, "are you okay?"

"Yea, just a little faint," John managed to find his voice.

"I'm Sindy Rawlings," she said, holding out her hand. John shook the offered hand.

"John Lowe, how can I help you?"

"Where to begin," she said, mainly to herself, "well it all happened twenty nine years ago," she saw the expression on Johns face and added, "please hear me out," John nodded. "Well my sister went missing, and we have heard nothing since.

"Surely this is a matter for the police?" He said, thinking, shit this was twenty nine years ago, talk about a cold case, this was bloody freezing!

"It was years ago," she smiled, and John had a sudden chill, and a feeling she had just been inside his head," but now it's just too long--, and well the police--"

"No offence, but why have you come to me? Have you tried anyone else? How long have you been looking?" John stammered.

"I don't really know why I came to you," she half smiled, "I'd often thought about what might have happened to her, but I've never done anything about it." She slowly paced the room, "In fact I don't really know what I'm doing here," she stopped pacing, "It's as though something drew me here, I had no intention of coming, but here I am, I didn't even know you were here."

"Okay I'll help you, if I can." John said, making a quick decision, not sure if it was the right one.

"Here's a picture of her," Sindy smiled, pulling out a creased black and white snap shot.

And this time John really did see a ghost from the past.

CHAPTER FOUR

John had hardly touched his food; he didn't feel much like eating. He just sat, staring at the old photo, half expecting it to change into a sea view, or a rolling landscape, or something he could at least believe in. But no. The smiling face of the pretty young girl stared back at him.

Maybe, he thought, the girl wasn't from a dream at all, maybe she was an old friend from school, and that's why he recognised her. Maybe bollocks!

He knew he was just trying to kid himself, he knew that dream only too well. And he knew, without a doubt, that the girl in the photo was the girl from his dream, and sitting staring at the bloody thing wasn't going to change anything, no matter how much he prayed.

Tomorrow he would set about trying to find out more about the girl's disappearance. He would like to think he was doing it for Sindy Rawlings, after all, she did set his heart racing, she had a certain something, and not just a ghostly sister!

But he knew that the main reason he would get stuck into the case was for him, that after all these years he might find a clue to the nightmares.

He was up at the crack of dawn, and after gulping down his breakfast he rang the local police station, and was happy to hear that Roy would be on duty a little later.

When he arrived at the police station Roy was already waiting for him.

"What's the matter John?" The craggy faced cop asked, his eyes worried.

John suddenly realised how his phone call must have sounded like from the other end

"There's nothing wrong," he smiled, "I'm sorry if I gave that impression, it's just that I need your help."

The old man's face relaxed, "Hell kid, I've been waiting here with all sort of things going through my mind." He shook his head and laid a heavy hand on John's shoulder, "Well spit it out son, and spit it out."

He told Roy about the visit he had received from Sindy Rawlings, and showed him the dog eared photo she had given him. He neglected however to say anything about the girl being a ghost from his nightmares, or for that matter, about the fact he was having any nightmares. As far as Roy was concerned this was just a case. But as he glanced up, he caught the slate grey eyes studying him hard.

"What's so special about this case?"

"Nothing," John lied, "it's just that it's my first case."

"Hell kid, you don't strike me as someone who would get all fired up just ,cos it's your first case."

John had no answer, he just grinned and shrugged. Roy shook his head and sighed, " It's a long time since I've heard this name." He stared hard at the photo, " this was one of my first real cases, hell, it must be over thirty years ago, I can remember this one, I really wanted us to find this girl." He seemed to be talking to himself now, John let him carry on with his monologue.

"Yea, this was just the first, there was a lot more disappearances after this one," he stopped abruptly, and looked sadly at John for a moment, before his craggy face broke into a half hearted smile, "Well lets go and have a look at what we can find."

John was tempted to ask for the files on the other cases that Roy had hinted at, but thought that he might be pushing his luck, after all, he had only been back a couple of minutes, and well, Roy was being helpful enough but who was to say that he was really friendly, after all John didn't mean anything special to him.

Behind the easy going exterior, John knew that there was a hard, shrewd man, taking everything in, and not being deceived by anything. He knew that his explanation for being so keen on the case hadn't fooled Roy for one minute, but what the hell was he supposed to say, he was chasing a ghost from his past?

It was a toss up on whether to take the files home to read, or take them to the office.

The office won. Although John wasn't too eager to go there, he didn't want to be distracted by other person, that's if there was any other people, coming in with their dilemmas, but he knew that it would be unprofessional to shut down on account of this one case, he could only hope that no new client would turn up.

As soon as he arrived at the office he dived right into the file. It didn't take too long to read, there wasn't that much in it. But one part that he kept re-reading was the place of the girl's last sighting. The field, his field.

He couldn't help wondering what she was doing in the field. She lived in the next village and she should have been at school at the time, but there she was up in the field for no apparent reason.

John jotted down the name of the man who had reported the sighting, Henry Woods. The report also indicated that when interviewed, Mr Woods had been badly beaten, and when asked how it had happened the man could give no explanation. So of course he became the main suspect, but nothing ever came of it. The case was never solved and was just filed away as that of another missing person.

A note was attached to the file that she was probably a run away. She was just thirteen and at that age---, John felt sick, if they couldn't solve a case, they would put it down as a run away, doesn't want to be found, and that was that!

He sat staring at the open file, half expecting something new to appear, something that would shout, "Hey, here I am! I'm what you're looking for, now you can solve the case, wrap it up and get back to your life."

But John knew that things were never that simple in the real world. He was brought back down to earth by the sound of the office door opening. His heart skipped a little when he saw Sindy. He wasn't sure if it reacted that way because of how attractive she was, or if it was the voice that had crawled into his head and rasped "BEWARE".

When she saw him she gave him a radiant smile, the smile warmed him more than the heating in the office could ever do. He smiled back and crushed the voice before it could utter any more warnings.

"I've got the file on your sister, but I'm afraid there's not much to go on." He sighed, getting to his feet.

"I didn't think there would be," noting his expression she added, "I've been through it all before." He nodded and offered her a chair.

Sitting back down opposite her, he was about to speak when she suddenly blurted out, "I'm going to help". He stared at her a moment, not really sure what she meant by her outburst, "What, how?"

"I don't know how, I just know that this time I'm going to try and help." She sounded matter of fact.

"Can you remember what happened the day your sister went missing?" He hadn't intended it to come out the way it had sounded, abrupt.

"Of course not, I was so young, but--" she broke off then went on, defensively, "Look, I'm gonna help and that's that!"

John thought about arguing, but the stubborn expression on her face warned him it would be useless.

"Okay, you can help, you can get me all the information on Sandra you can find, anything at all you can dig up, and I wouldn't mind going to see your parents, after all, you haven't even given me an address yet." He noticed the sudden cloud fall across her face, but it only stayed a moment,

"Both my parents are dead."

"I'm sorry, I---,"

"It was some time ago, but I'll see what I can find on Sandra."

John felt like kicking himself, but before he could say another word she was on her feet and heading for the door. Turning, she shot him a brief smile over her shoulder, and was gone.

John shook his head, he wasn't sure if he had upset her or not. He suddenly realised that she still hadn't given him an address, he rushed out after her. Taking the stairs two at a time, nearly falling when he hit the bottom, he rushed out the main door. The cold air pierced his ears, blowing his untidy hair across his face, he brushed it aside and glanced up and down the street. Nothing, she was nowhere in sight. But she couldn't have moved that speedily, he was only a few seconds after her.

As he turned to go back inside he noticed a large, black cat in the shadow of a doorway opposite, it seemed to turn and smile at him. Was that (his) cat? No, it couldn't be.

Once back in the office, what little warmth the heating gave felt inadequate. He gave an inward shiver and sat back at his desk. Just then the phone rang. He half expected it to be Sindy, but when no one spoke on the other end he demanded, "Who ever you are either speak or put the bloody phone down!". He was rewarded by a loud, Sharpe static from the other end, and as he listened, the static sounded more like a thousand voices chanting the same word, but he couldn't make out what that word was.

He suddenly felt stupid, he knew from experience that if you watched the static on a television set after the station had gone off air, you could convince yourself that you were witnessing messages from another planet, and, if you watched long enough you would be able to understand what they were trying to say.

He slammed the receiver down, and snatched it back up again. The static had gone, now all he could hear was the dialling tone. The phone seemed okay, but he would ring telecom just to be on the safe side.

His mind wandered back to Sindy, and he had an idea. He pulled out the local phone book, and let his fingers do the walking. But after a lot of walking he drew a blank.

God, how could he have done something so stupid? To take on a case and not even ask the persons address, or at least their telephone number, hell he needed a good kick up the arse, but he wasn't sure if he could manage it. All he could do now was sit and wait for her to get in touch. The phone rang once more. Her maybe? He snatched up the receiver and his ear was suddenly filled with a loud hissing sound, as he listened it grew louder and louder.

"Is this some kind of a joke?!" He screamed down the line, going red in the face.

"I'm sorry sir, but you asked us to check the line."

"Oh, I'm sorry, it's just that-err-I," John stammered, biting his lip.

"We've checked the line and we can't find anything wrong, would you like us to send someone to check for any loose connections at your end?" The telecom worker talked politely, not in the least ruffled by John's outburst.

"No it will be okay," he said, trying his best to sound just as polite.

After an hour of sitting, getting up and pacing the room and then sitting again, John decided that if he didn't do something he would go out of his mind, he couldn't just hang

around the office waiting for the answers to come to him. He decided that he would go and see Henry Woods. But he knew that finding Henry Woods wasn't going to be straight forward, nothing ever was for him.

After driving to the address on the report, which was a pretty bloody long shot, he drove back to the office and did some ringing round. He was glad he was on the phone and not face to face, as he had to come up with some really good grovelling, and after promising favours that would take him at least a month to chip into, he found that Henry Woods had moved away not long after being released from police custody.

Although there was nothing to the rumours of his guilt, people liked to have somebody to point the finger at, and they did more than just point the finger at him. After one good beating too many, and an arson attack on his house, he had finally fled.

John learned that he was now living at an old peoples home in Wrexham, and also, he was no longer Henry Woods, he was now Henry Morgan, John guessed he was kind of attached to being a Henry.

On the drive down to Wrexham, John tried to decide on the best line of approach, after all it was a long time ago, and he was bound to stir up old memories. Bad memories. And old, Henry wasn't gonna say " come in old friend, I'd love to talk to a complete stranger about the rough time I had, and by the way, I did kill her and she's buried down

a bank by an old oak tree! Well done, you've solved the case that had so many stumped, you really are one hell of a detective!"

Yea, one hell of a detective, John laughed to himself. But old, Henry did welcome him in, and he did say he would love to talk to him. But he never admitted to murder, if of course there ever was a murder, for the body had never been found. There was a chance that Sandra had had an accident, lost her memory and was now doing well for herself living in Scotland, thank you very much. But John knew she was dead. He'd seen her killed, at least in a dream, he had dreamt her death and it seemed real.

Henry was a frail old man, and John guessed that the only reason he was telling his story was because he was lonely. And he probably knew his time was running out, and he wanted one last opportunity to convince someone, anyone of his innocence.

John listened to the old mans monologue with out interrupting him. He doubted that Henry would have heard him if he did. He seemed to have drifted back in time and was re-living his past experience. The colour had drained from his sunken cheeks, and his eyes were glazed over and fixed as he retold his story.

"I didn't kill her!" He suddenly turned to John, "it wasn't me, and they thought it was but it wasn't".

"How do you know that she is dead?" John urged. After a brief moment the old man blurted out, "I saw her killed." His eyes had reddened and the tears flowed freely down his crater cheeks. John felt a pang of sympathy, but knew he had to keep pushing.

"Who killed her Henry, who killed her, and why didn't you tell the police?"

"Tell them what!" his voice was raised to a high pitch, " tell them that the devil himself killed her, tell them it was some goddamned snake monster, yea, I'm sure they would have believed that."

John felt a chill creep over his heart, "the devil, what do you mean the devil?" "It was the devil alright, he was covered in flesh and blood and fur he had ripped from his prey, and on his head was the biggest set of fangs set into a gaping mouth, and the noise he made was inhuman." Henry was speaking in a near whisper now. John's nightmare suddenly came to life. Had Henry had the same nightmare, or had he really seen the slaying? John's heart was beating so fast that he thought his chest would explode at any moment.

"I, ve had enough now, leave me alone." Henry was no longer friendly, in fact he seemed quite savage now.

"Before I go, how do you know it was Sandra Rawlings?"

"Of course I know it was Sandra Rawlings, I knew the family very well."

Strange, John thought, why hadn't Sindy mentioned this, her parents must have spoken of him at one time or another. John tried a softer approach, " it must have been hard on her parents, and on you, what with you being a friend of the family. It must have been hard them treating you as a suspect."

The old man was on his feet now, and was waving his finger hard enough to shake it off, "They never did believe I had anything to do with it, they were the only ones who didn't think so." He suddenly slumped back into his seat, dejected.

"I'm sorry, but what about Sindy, how did she take it?"

"Sindy, who's Sindy?"

"Sindy, Sandra sister."

"Look mister, I don't know what game you're trying to play, but she had no sister."

Maybe he had misunderstood, maybe she was born after Sandra's disappearance, a nagging fear started to gnaw away at his chest.

CHAPTER FIVE.

Back in the office he checked his answering machine for the faint chance that Sindy might have rung. She hadn't. Nor had anyone else. John felt slightly deflated, although he didn't really want anyone else to come with their problems, it still would be encouraging to be in some sort of demand.

Well he was a detective, so that was what he would do. Detect. Only now he wanted to detect the person that had hired him to detect, Sindy Rawlings. He called a friend who had access to credit search, and drew a blank. So what did that prove, he mused, she wasn't in the phone book or had any credit or wasn't in any debt. She could be living with someone and the numbers listed in the other person's name, simple.

He calls a friend in the DHSS, and drew a blank there too, so she wasn't claiming benefit, which would support the theory that she was living with someone. She might even be married. John didn't know why, but this thought didn't cheer him up one little bit. He flushed, and pushed the thought out of his mind. Besides, if she was married, why had she used her maiden name, and why not just say she was married? Yea and why not give him some way of contacting her!

The rest of the day sneaked by without event. It was already dark when John arrived back at the house and the only sound in the night air was the crunch of his boots on the thin layer of frost that was icing the path. Clouds formed about his face at every breath he took. He stopped and listened. Nothing. He was out in the wilds but he still expected to hear traffic from the main road, after all it was rush hour now, but no sound filtered up to him.

There were no night birds, no breeze, and no planes over head, nothing. John felt an icy chill crawl down his spine, and he suddenly had the feeling he was being watched. His glance darted about the dark surroundings, nothing looked out of place. But what caught his attention were the trees swaying back and forth in the wind, yet there was no wind, at least no wind he could hear or feel. Perhaps I'm coming down with a cold, he thought.

Just then a sound did come to his ears. It was only slight, but he heard it as if it had come from inside his head. He turned to see the black cat, bathed in moonlight, watching him carefully through one eye.

It slowly got up and walked into the shadows. He was about to follow it when a figure came gliding round the corner. John stopped in his tracks, his heart thumping. An intruder was his first thought, but if so, it was an intruder that didn't seem too scared of being caught.

He stared at the black clad figure, but made no move towards it. If there's going to be a confrontation, I'd prefer it to be out here in the open, he decided.

But there was no fight. John felt his heart beat again with a jolt. Beneath the black bobble hat the intruder was wearing, the moonlight illuminated the white face that was no longer hidden by the shadows.

"I'm sorry I scared you," Sindy smiled.

John had the feeling she wasn't sorry in the least.

"I know it's late but I had to see you."

He felt like returning some smart remark to make her feel awkward, but he just didn't have a smart remark in him, so the best he could do was grunt, and open the front door.

Once inside he rounded on her, about to give her a piece of his mind, but the smiling face, that looked so innocent melted away what anger he had.

"I don't know, you shouldn't go sneaking in the shadows, you could get yourself hurt," he said with a laugh, shaking his finger at her in mock rebuke.

"Look," she responded, "how about a drink?"

"I've only got tea or coffee." He replied, apologetically.

"That's fine." She turned and made her way to the kitchen.

John followed her and watched as she set about making the drinks. As he watched, he became concerned at something rather odd. She didn't need to route round for the cups, coffee, spoon, nothing.

She just went straight to the right drawer, or cupboard, no hesitation.

Hell, John thought, I'm letting my imagination run away with me, it's ever since I came back to this god forsaken place. It's no big deal, so she knows where things are without having to ask, I wouldn't be surprised if I couldn't go to her house and do the very same thing. If I knew where she lived that is, he mumbled to himself

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Nothing," he hadn't realised that he had spoken aloud. He accepted the mug of coffee from Sindy and they returned to the front room.

They both sat there sipping the steaming liquid, neither apparently wishing to be the first to speak. As much as John liked sitting there with her, he knew that Sindy hadn't just come round for a cup of coffee. Finally John broke the silence,

"It's good to see you Sindy, but you're not after a progress report already are you?" He said light heartedly.

"Of course not," she smiled, "you don't have to worry, I'm not one of those people who wants results yesterday, it would be great, but I know you can't work miracles." she hesitated a moment, as if trying to find the right words, "well you know I want to help as much as I can, I was thinking the other night and I remembered my parents talking about a man whom the police had questioned."

John interrupted the flow, "this man, he wouldn't happen to be Henry Woods, would he?"

"Why yes, how do you know?" She cast him a look of angry perplexity.

"I've already talked to him, no joy" he shrugged.

"But his saw---" she stopped in mid sentence, the vexation that had suddenly boiled up in her didn't escape John's notice.

Although it had only been there an instant, the look in her eyes had sent an army of goose pimples marching down his spine, and as he watched her, he had the feeling she was fighting hard to get her anger under control.

She stared back at him, as if wondering if he was aware of her sudden annoyance.

John smiled at her, hiding any sign that he had indeed noticed.

Sindy sank back a little in the chair, "I remember," she continued, "my parents saying that the police tried to blame him for Sandra's disappearance, but they never thought he had anything to do with it. He told them he saw someone attacking my sister in the field across from this house, but he wouldn't tell this story to the police for some reason."

She suddenly propelled herself off the chair and ran to the window, pulling back the curtain she pointed to the field.

"That field!" She cried, her gaze turned accusingly towards John.

"Wow, hold on there, that's not my field," he exclaimed, hands held high.

Sindy stared at him, stony eyed a moment longer, and then sank to her knees, her body raked with uncontrollable sobbing.

John rushed over to her and gently put his arms around her shoulders.

This action seemed to set off a trip wire and the whole room was soon resounding with her wails. John had never been very good with women, and he certainly didn't know how to act now. He decided that the best thing to do was to do nothing.

He sat on the floor, arm around Sindy, for a least ten minutes before the sobbing started to subside. At last she turned to look at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, "you must think I'm stupid getting so upset after all these years about a sister I never really knew, but, well, I'm just like that."

"It's not stupid, I often wish I could have feelings like that," John whispered, but not really convinced that that was the only reason for her outburst.

Sindy leaned forward and lightly kissed him on the cheek, then nestled her head against his chest.

John sighed; he hadn't had a moment like this for a long time. But something inside told him it wasn't right.

It was strange that she should get so upset about her long lost sister; after all as she said, she couldn't possibly remember her. And it also seemed strange that she had suddenly remembered her parents going on about Henry Woods.

Hell, her parents wouldn't be discussing the matter with her. He didn't know just how old she was when her parents died, but she had hinted at being very young, so unless she had overheard them talking, he doubted very much that they had told her the story themselves.

He realised that he really didn't know anything about her past life, or for that matter, her present life. Until now it had never really mattered that he hadn't known anything about his clients, the cases had always been straight forward. But this case was far from that.

"Look Sindy," he decided, "tell me more about yourself, your past, present, anything."

She studied him for a long time before making up her mind.

"Well I guess I'm just an average girl," she said, brushing away her remaining tears, and fluttering her eyelashes.

"Just an average, working girl," John persisted.

"Yes just an average working girl, although nothing glamorous, I work in an army and navy store."

"Wow that is glamorous!" John mocked. "Where?"

"Where, oh err in Chester."

"Chester, I haven't been there for a very long time, maybe I can meet you for lunch sometime?"

"Maybe," she said in a tone that cried, not a chance. Perhaps it's just as well, John thought slightly taken back, there is a golden rule, don't get mixed up with a client. And as he knew only too well, it was a bloody good rule, one that shouldn't be broken.

"I don't even know where you live," he said

"Why would you want to know that?" she eyed him suspiciously.

"Well for the records for one thing."

"I don't want to go on any record." she growled.

"Okay then, what about a phone number in case I need to get hold of you."

"I'll be in touch regularly." she returned, stubbornly.

"Oh come on Sindy, I'm not asking that much is I?" he exclaimed, getting a bit fed up with the whole thing.

"No you're not, I'm sorry, its Chester 317718."

"Well thank you!" John grinned, "I promise I won't ring in the middle of the night and spoil your beauty sleep."

"Oh so you think I need my beauty sleep do you?" She growled light heartedly, throwing a fake punch.

John threw his hands up over his head, "please no more beatings master," he wailed, in a crappy southern Negro accent.

The tension that had built up quickly melted away at this moment.

For the next two hours they chatted about her past, his past, and their school days.

Although they had attended the same school, they had never met. She was nearly two years younger it turned out, but the school was only a small one and he recalled that everyone knew just about everyone. Well not everyone it seemed.

John started to think that perhaps he'd known her sister and that was why he kept having the nightmares.

Maybe he had witnessed her murder, and swept it to the back of his mind, it certainly wasn't uncommon for people to block out really horrible events in their lives. And that would account for the nightmares.

The thought didn't really appeal to him. Here was Sindy trying to find out what had happened to her sister, and maybe he had seen her murdered. One thing was for sure, and that was he wasn't about to tell her of his dreams, for one thing she might think he was mad, or worse.

The answer was in the field, John was sure of it, but how was he going to find anything? After all these years there wouldn't be anything waiting up there for him to discover. And he couldn't go up there with a shovel and dig the place up, even if he wanted to.

But maybe he could dig in just one spot. He knew the dream so well by now, not just the girl and the freak hacking her up, but he knew every tree, every rise in the ground and every hedge in the background.

The place had never rung any bells with him, but if he went up into the field and walked every square inch, then if the spot was up there, he'd find it. He knew that this was the thing to do after seeing old, man Woods, but he didn't really have the bottle to do it. Tomorrow morning however he would find the bottle.

He suddenly had the feeling of eyes boring into him, he turned and saw Sindy, head cocked, staring hard at him.

"Penny for your thoughts," she offered.

"I'm sorry, I was miles away then, in fact I'm really tired," he jibbed.

"Well it is getting late, I'll be on my way," she stood up, taking the cue.

"I wasn't trying to get rid of you, you can stay longer if you wish," John said quickly.

"No thanks, I really must go."

John was relieved, although he liked her company, he needed time to think. When they reached the door he suddenly had a pang of guilt at not offering to drive her home, "I can give you a lift," he quickly added.

"No thank you, I'm alright, I've left my car just down the lane."

John was sure that he hadn't seen any car when he arrived home, but he didn't push it, maybe she wanted to walk, he doubted it very much as it was a good seven miles to Chester, or even if she lived on the outskirts, within the Chester code, it was still at least three miles.

After she had left he went back into the kitchen to make himself another drink. He was filling the kettle when something caught his eye; standing on the fridge was Sindy, s handbag.

He slowly walked towards it as if it was a sacred object. He suddenly had the urge to open it, and scatter its contents on the floor, maybe that way he would get to know a bit more about her, not just the things she wanted him to know.

But he pushed the urge aside, and just stared at it. He was startled out of his trance by a loud, heavy knock on the front door. He swept up the bag and rushed to answer it, "You forgot this," he said swinging the door open and displaying the bag in his outstretched hand.

But the face staring back at him wasn't Sindy, s, but the craggy well lived in face of Roy.

"I guess you thought I was someone else," he grinned. John reddened and stammered, "Hi Roy, a girl- err- friend just left and she forgot this, I thought you was her."

"Hell, you have them doing their own washing up after they do you?" Roy laughed. John looked puzzled.

"The tea towel," Roy nodded at John's hand. John glanced at it and couldn't believe his eyes, the bag had gone, and in its place was a tea towel. Shit, I really am tired, he thought. He craned his neck round Roy, trying to see down the lane.

"What are you looking for?" Roy asked, also craning his head.

"The girl, the women who just left."

Roy stared at John hard, seeing the confused look on his face.

"Well if she just left I believe you, but I've just come up the lane and I sure as hell didn't pass anyone."

John glared at him utterly confused.

"Look boys, how about us going inside, have a drink and you can tell me all about it." Said Roy comfortingly.

CHAPTER SIX.

Roy stayed well over an hour, an hour to long as far as John was concerned. He was glad to see him, but didn't really want to talk about the case, and he certainly didn't want to discuss Sindy.

In the end, he told Roy as much about the affair as he dared without mentioning Sindy. After all, he thought, Roy had worked on the case the first time around, and god only knew he needed some help; maybe Roy might have some information that might prove useful.

He half expected Roy to guess that it was Sandra's sister that had hired him, but he said nothing, in fact he never even asked who had hired him.

When John finally managed to get rid of Roy, without being obvious, he went straight to bed, and was a sleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. But it was by no means a peaceful sleep. The nightmares came, and he had to witness Sandra's ordeal once more. But this time it was ten times worse. For this time the girl had a name, she was now a real person, and this time he could feel pain. The next morning he was up and out early. There was a thin layer of frost on the ground, and his breath bellowed out like smoke balls and almost froze as it left his mouth.

He debated on whether to go back inside and wait till it warmed up a bit, or get on with the task in hand. The task in hand won, but he wasn't quite sure how!

He left a trail of crushed frosted grass as he beat a path through the field. As soon as his feet had hit the ground on the other side of the gate he had begun to feel light headed. He tried to screw his eyes tightly shut, but all that did was to send bright lights cascading through his skull.

He knew that something didn't want him in the field, but couldn't help feeling daft for believing this. And he would be even dafter if he let it scare him off. So he carried on with his quest, his feet getting heavier with every step.

He had an idea just where he was going to look, and after only half an hour he came upon the spot from his nightmares, well at least it looked like the spot, he was almost certain.

Something on the ground caught his eye; he kicked it with the toe of his boot. He knew that the fire must have been a recent one, because if it had been an old one, the pieces of half burnt paper would have blown away before the frost had come down.

John tried to peel the bits of paper apart, but when the frost finally gave up its grip, all he managed to do was rip the fragments even smaller.

He searched the area for another half hour, not really expecting to find anything that would help his case. He wasn't disappointed, he found absolutely nothing.

But someone had been in the field, somebody recently, and he or she, had lit a fire. But who the hell would be camping out this time of year? It could be a tramp, or even kids. But if it had been kids they would have had a tent, why else light a fire? But as far as

he could see there was no sign of a tent ever being there, so that left the tramp, but even tramps would have found a better spot to sleep than an open field. So who? The sun was climbing up over the horizon, and the frost retreated from the warm yellow rays that washed over everything in sight. Only the frost that remained in the shade was being stubborn, but the sun would win in the end, thought John.

Although he didn't really like the frost, he always felt kind of really clean when it was a crisp morning like this one.

So the frost melted away, and he began to question just what he was doing up in a field at such a ridiculously early hour.

He started back down the slope, and the closer he got to the gate, the more quickly the headache that had plagued him for the last hour or so, started to subside.

And as soon as he leapt over the gate the headache completely vanished. He felt as though a heavy weight had suddenly been snatched off his head.

Well, what was the strategy now? What, no idea? Well, he'd better go and have a drink and think of one.

Hell, he had set off this morning with what he thought was a good plan, but when he thought about it, it wasn't really a plan at all.

It was just something to make him feel he was going into action. Ah, what was the use, he was just kidding himself. He knew that this action was even less than nothing. If he was truthful with himself he didn't even have a good excuse for taking the job in the first place.

Sure it was a ghost from his past, but even he knew he couldn't keep chasing a ghost from thirty years ago.

There was the fact that Cindy was sure a good looking lady, but hell, she wouldn't think much of him if he just strung her along, and simply took the money.

That was a point, he hadn't had a penny from her yet, and the way the case was going, he wouldn't have the nerve to ask for any. He sighed inwardly; he knew that somehow Cindy and her sister were mixed up in his troubled past.

Her sister had been his main bloody nightmare in his childhood, for Christ sake.

And, what was more, his main bloody nightmare since he had been back, but what the hell could he do?

After all, he wasn't bloody Colombo; he was really just a novice at this type of detective work. And this case had stumped the experts for thirty years, so what did he hope to find in just a few days, nothing. And what's more, he knew that that would be all he would solve in this case, bloody nothing!

As he dragged himself up the path he noticed the black cat watching him. No, the look on the cats face seemed to be accusing him. John shrugged his shoulders, even the cat knew him for what he was.

He opened the front door and stopped halfway over the threshold. He turned back round to stare at the offending cat, but the cat had gone.

"What have I done to feel guilty about?" He hissed out into the direction the cat might have taken.

He back heeled the door behind him so hard, that it rattled in its jambs, and then he hobbled into the front room and threw himself into the nearest chair.

He sat, heart pounding, thinking of ways of breaking it to Sindy that he could no longer take the case.

After half an hour he was still no wiser as to how he was going to tell her. But tell her he must, and now was as good a time as any.

He reached over and grabbed the phone. But what was the number? He couldn't remember it to save his life, but he had known this would happen, so as soon as she had left he had written it down. But where the hell was that bloody piece of paper he had scribbled it on.

He searched high and low, but couldn't find the bloody thing. Cursing, he decided that he would make a drink, sit down and hope that it would come to him in the mean time.

His temper had risen to such a pitch that in the end he was searching in the same place time after time. As soon as he opened the cupboard where the tea was kept, he let out a small bark of laughter; staring back at him was the piece of paper with the number on it.

John strolled over to the phone. Now that he had found the number, he wasn't in that much of a hurry to ring it. Making up his mind, he snatched up the phone and dialled. Nothing. He stared at the number, 317718; it was a local number so it didn't need a code. He dialled again, this time putting the area code in front of it. Still nothing.

Maybe he had written it down wrong. He tried a few variations on the digits. He got through to a taxi firm, the local gateway store, and one very angry man who wasn't the least bit pleased at being woken at what he called an unearthly time.

John dropped the receiver back into place and stared at it, half expecting the guy on the other end to come hurling out of it to stick one on him.

He hadn't realised just how early it still was, he felt as though he had been up for hours, but then again, he had. So Sindy had given him a dud number. He felt rather hurt, and a hell of a lot annoyed. Shit, he was supposed to be working for her, so why on earth was she lying to him?

Well, now he wouldn't feel so guilty about dropping the case. He slumped back into the chair and let out a heavy sigh, he was starting to feel tired now. He shouldn't do, he had been up a lot earlier than this many a time, and done a full day and night on top of it.

The army and navy store! It suddenly came to him that was where she said she worked. An army and navy store in Chester.

There were two stores in Chester, and after ringing both of them, all it did was piss him off. Sindy didn't work in any of them, in fact no one had bloody even heard of her, unless they were lying, and he couldn't see any reason why they should.

So what now? The only thing he could do was waiting for her to get in touch with him; he was becoming a real expert on waiting on her.

Maybe a hot bath would help calm him down; the cold had seeped into his bones, making him even more depressed. Maybe later he would go to the office to see if anything had turned up, he didn't know what would turn up, but hey.--

He let the hot water wash over him and felt his tightly knotted muscles start to relax. Suddenly strong hands grabbed his head and pushed his whole body down into the water. He felt the soapy liquid fill his lungs and gasped at the foul taste, omitting his last breath of air. He thrashed his arms and legs about, spilling as much of the bath water as he could, and blindly searched for the plug.

He tried to open his eyes to get a glimpse of his attacker, but the water stung them and blurred his vision. Reaching behind, he managed to free one of the hands that held him, and turning his head he sunk his teeth in hard, until they hit bone, he ground them together and could taste the coppery tang of fresh blood as he ripped the flesh away.

A high pitched squeal bounced round the small bathroom, but instead of letting go, the grip on his head got harder. John felt his séances reel, he knew that it was only a matter of time before he passed out, and if he did, he knew that it would be the end for him.

But as much as he tried to break the grip he couldn't and there was nothing he could do as the darkness marched out and claimed him.

John's eyes flickered, and then opened, he tried to focus but everything was blurred. With the tips of his fingers he gently rubbed the dried soap from his sore lids. Slowly, he remembered being attacked. But why was he still alive? And more to the point, who wanted him dead?

If someone did want him dead, maybe he was closer on the case than he thought. But if someone wanted him dead, he had no doubt that he would be dead, so somebody was trying to scare him. Well they had bloody succeeded! But if they had taken the time to ask, they would have known that they need not have bothered.

John realised, with a shiver that he was now sitting in a bath with no water. Looking around the room he saw the plug by the foot of the door. He couldn't remember getting to the plug. What he noticed was that there was no sign of any wet footprints, or blood. He was sure that he had inflicted a deep injury, so why no blood? And why was the door shut, as he had left it? Maybe his attacker liked to be orderly.

Weakly, John climbed out of the empty tub; he shook his damp hair and tied it back, something that he would normally never do without drying it first. Then, getting dressed, he slowly opened the door. He was ready to dive back inside at the first sight of a two headed monster with an axe.

But there was no monster. Only the bloody cat, sitting just outside as though waiting for him to finish in the bathroom, and ready to take his turns in there.

John let out a deep breath and slowly peered around the door. Nothing. No sign of anything out of the normal. As John approached the cat it let out a sharp hiss. He stopped, concerned, and then noticed the pool of blood by its front paw.

The cat hissed again, then stood, shook its injured paw and trotted down the stairs. John quickly followed, but by the time he was at the bottom the cat was nowhere to be seen.

After a quick search of the house, John found that it was still well secured. If someone had been in the house, then they had locked up again after they left.

"What the hells going on?" John demanded from his reflection as he passed the hall mirror.

"Beats me" the familiar looking guy shrugged.

John suddenly had a thought, one that un-nerved him, the last time that he had seen the cat it was outside, and it sure as hell didn't come in when he did, so unless it had had a key cut, how did the bloody thing get in? And, just as big a mystery, how had it got back out.

Things had gone bad as soon as he had returned to this god forsaken place, and things always went twice as bad when that cat was around.

John got some stain cleaner and a cloth, and went up to wipe the blood away before it ground in to deep and stained.

But things were never that simple. Reaching the top of the stairs, he could see that the blood had gone. Kicking round in the carpet pile, as though he would suddenly find the blood beneath some dust or dirt, John vented a loud scream. He had had just about as

much of this house as he could take, he had to get out, and he could feel his head spinning and the foul taste of bile rises in his throat. He knew that if he didn't escape quickly he would throw up.

The drive into town seemed to take forever. Even the sun shining on this crisp November morning couldn't make John feel any better.

Once inside his office he began to feel (safe), if safe was the right word, as though his office was his secure haven from the outside world. Checking the answering machine he found that he had had only one call, and that call wasn't from Sindy, not that he had expected one from her, he had just hoped.

Roy had sounded urgent, and John was intrigued to find out what it was he had wanted, but he could wait, so he would sit back and wait for him to call back. Picking up the daily paper, the headlines screamed at him, six school children had gone missing in as many weeks. This was startling enough news, but what jumped out at John was the fact that they all disappeared within a ten mile radius of Buckley.

How was it that he hadn't heard anything about it? In a small place like this, the gossip fly's well ahead of the news, how was it that all the gossip mongers had missed this one?

Perhaps it was him. He had been so preoccupied that he hadn't noticed much of what was going on around him. A loud rapping on the glass panelled door startled him so much he nearly dropped the paper.

"Come in!" He yelled, half expecting to see Sindy, s smiling face,

But Sindy, s smiling face had aged and now looked a lot like Roy's. And the face certainly didn't have a smile on it. In fact the face looked down right unfriendly.

"What's the matter Roy?" John said, scrambling to his feet.

"I'll get straight to the point, and I don't want any smart assed answers," Roy growled, his granite eyes boring deep into John, "do you know Henry Woods?"

John stared at the older man, and realised that the best thing to do was to tell the truth.

"Sure, I went to see him the other day, why?"

The old man seemed to relax, and John was glad that he had decided to tell the truth. Roy settled into a chair before replying.

"Because he's been murdered, that's why."

John felt as though someone had punched him in the gut and clean knocked the wind out of him. He fell back into the chair with a thud.

"Who would want to kill him, a burglar?" That could be the only answer.

"It was no burglar that killed this guy, it was one sick bastard."

Roy told him every gory, grisly detail of how old, man Woods had died. And by the time he had finished John felt as though he had aged at least ten years, and what strength he had had, drained into the carpet under his feet.

"So," Roy whispered, "I would be much obliged if you could give me any help you can."

John looked at the man sitting in front of him, he no longer looked a big, tough fellow, and he now looked like an aging pensioner going to a fancy dress ball. John decided to tell him about the case, and about Sindy.

"Well John, if you're telling me right, then you has been had."

"What do you mean; I've been had, had by whom?"

"By this Sindy, if that is her name, but whoever she is, she ain, t Sandra Rawlings sister, nor, as far as I know, any relation of Sandra's."

So what was the reason for all the lies, and if she wasn't Sandra's sister, then who was she? And what was her concern in the case? What was her motive? John was in no doubt that she had known more about the case than she had let on.

"Well I'll be off now," Roy said, getting to his feet, now looking back to his former self, "I'll call round tonight and we'll discuss it some more."

The way the words were spoken sounded very much like a threat, and John was suddenly left with the feeling that he no longer cared if tonight never came.

He showed Roy to the door and watched the big man as he swayed down the stairs, daring anyone to get in his way, and he had an image appear in his head of John Wayne in a British coppers outfit.

John waited all day, but apart from a few prank calls, nothing came in. No new cases, nothing. He was willing to take on anything at the moment; it would serve as one excuse to tell Sindy to stuff the case.

He couldn't get the killing of Henry Woods out of his mind. Something kept gnawing away at him, telling him that if he hadn't gone to see the old man, he would still be alive.

By five o'clock he still hadn't had any word from Sindy, so he decided that he would call it a day. After all Roy hadn't said what time he intended to come round, and if he wasn't there, then he might think he was trying to avoid the issue.

Leaving the office he was surprised by how dark it had become, and the night air had a real bite to it, so he pulled his collar up as far as he could, and half trotted, half ran to the car park opposite.

Opening the car door and jumping in behind the wheel, he said a quiet prayer, and was rewarded by the sound of the engine kicking into life at the first turn of the key. The drive home was only about ten minutes, but it felt like a lot longer than that to John. As he turned into the lane that led to his house he thought he saw something in the hedge as his lights shone on it, he switched them on to full beam but there was nothing visible.

He was about thirty yards from his home when something jumped out into the road ahead. It was a dark figure, and even his headlights didn't illuminate any features. "What the hell's his game?" John cursed, slamming on his brakes. But the brakes didn't work. John stamped on the peddle again, still nothing. He watched as if in slow motion as the figure slowly turned, and his headlights suddenly picked out the smooth features of Sindy. John watched in horror as she smiled and waved at him, making no effort to move out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. Instead she started to walk towards it.

John tried the brakes once more, but instead of slowing down, the car hurtled forwards.

He felt the impact and stared in horror as one moment she was there, the next she was gone. He felt sick as he felt the car rise as it rode over her body. After another ten yards, the car came to a grinding halt, it was as though the brakes had only just realised that they had been pressed.

John jumped out and ran to the heap in the middle of the road. Sindy looked up and smiled a crooked smile, "don't be to long" she whispered. He only half heard the words as he ripped his coat off and draped it over her. At that moment a cars headlights fell across them bathing them in an eerie yellow glow. John scrambled to his feet and ran to meet it, arms waving wildly.

"What the hells going on?" Roy yelled, hanging out the window and bringing the car to a shuddering halt.

"Call an ambulance! I've run over her!"

"Run over whom, boy!"

"Sindy, quick!"

Roy charged past him and knelt beside the body in the road. "Is this some kind of a joke?" Roy screamed, turning to John, his face going an angry purple.

"What do you mean some kind of a joke?" John hissed back, amazed at Roy's actions, "call a fucking ambulance now!"

Roy got to his feet in one easy movement and grabbed him by the shoulder and threw him down beside the body on the ground,

"So this is Sindy, is it?" he spat.

John looked at Roy as though he had just landed from another planet and had ordered pizza and chips to go. What the hell was he playing at, had he gone mad?

"Look, she's bloody dying," John pleaded, turning to the limp bundle.

But it wasn't Sindy, if it was her, she had suddenly lost a lot of weight, and her hair had turned jet black.

John's jaw fell open. It was Sindy, he saw her, he had hit her for god's sake, so where was she? He sat on the cold tarmac, gently rocking too and fro. Roy put a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he didn't notice, he didn't notice anything; He couldn't tear his eyes away from the limp body of the lifeless cat that was protruding from beneath his coat.

CHAPTER SEVEN. Virtualventures

He sipped the steaming coffee that Roy had made without really tasting it. Was he going mad? He had seen Sindy, he'd spoken to her, and there was no bloody way he could get her mixed up with a cat.

So where did she go? Perhaps she wasn't dead, and when he had run to meet the car, she had got up, and placed the cat under the coat. And maybe bullshit, his common sense screamed. John's mind was racing twenty to the dozen, but it wasn't racing to any conclusions, nothing seemed to drop into place. He suddenly realised that Roy was speaking.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Well the reason I called tonight," the big man began, not looking from his coffee, "was I could do with some help. This recent spate of kids going missing, well to be frank, we suspected Woods thirty years ago, we always knew that he knew more than he was letting on, but we just couldn't prove anything, and with this recent lot, we thought Woods might be behind it, I tried keeping an eye on him, but, well you know--"

John had been listening hard so as not to let his mind go a wandering. The big man seemed to be blaming himself for Woods death.

"Maybe some parent of one of the kids that's gone missing may have thought the same, and taken the law into their own hands."

"I thought of that, but there would be no way that any parents could know about Woods, or about the kids who went missing thirty years ago."

John wasn't so sure, he'd found in his career that the public knew a lot more than the police imagined, but he didn't say as much, "look on the bright side; someone might have done you a favour."

Roy raised his head and gave John an ugly stare. There I go, putting my big foot in it again; John mentally scolded himself, waiting for the lecture. But the rebuke never came, the big cop in front of him just shook his head and sighed, "I only wish that was the case, but another kids gone missing since Woods death."

John took the words and rolled them around in his mind,

"Maybe just a coincidence, can you be sure this ones the same?"

"I can't be sure of anything, but I feel it here." the granite faced man hissed, hitting his barrel chest with a hollow thud.

John looked at him with a pang of sympathy, he really did appear to be in need of some help, and this case seemed to be eating away at him. John guessed that his failure to solve the puzzle all those years ago was making him even more determined to solve this one now.

But thirty years ago he was just starting out, he couldn't blame himself. John felt like telling him this, but looking at the man in front of him, he thought he might just be pushing what friendship they had a little too far.

Roy opened the case he had brought with him and pulled out a thick bundle of files. Tossing them over him grinned, "read them and tell me what you make of it"

"What now?" John gasped, "It'll take all night."

"I've nothing planned, have you?"

Before he could answer, Roy quickly produced another set of files, even thicker than the last lot, "And when you've read them you can go through these, they're the case files from thirty years ago."

"Hey," John protested, "won't you get in trouble for showing me these?"

"In deep shit, but no ones going to find out are they."

John shook his head in submission, and set about reading the files. It was a task he did reluctantly at first, but as he read his eagerness kicked into gear, and his detective instincts were back on over drive.

He only paused a couple of times to ask a few questions, and the files were finished in just over two hours. Closing the last file he drew in a deep breath and asked, "Okay, what am I looking for?"

"A pattern, something that ties these people together."

"But I couldn't see any pattern, all these people are different, they come from all walks of life, some are out of work, some professional, and one of them is the mayor's son."

"That's it," John suddenly exclaimed, "now I see what's eating you!"

"Hey! I'm just as concerned about the out of workers kids," Roy jumped on him, anger rising.

"I'm sorry, that remark was uncalled for," John quickly added.

"Maybe it would be a good idea to read there other set of files in the morning," Roy stood up, his annoyance clearly still there.

John knew that he must have hit a raw nerve, but didn't argue, it would be best to let him cool down, he just couldn't help saying the wrong things lately, he reflected.

After Roy had left, John tried to watch some television, but after an hour he gave up, he wasn't watching the programme so much as staring at the screen.

He decided that all the reading had tired him out and an early night was called for. He wasn't really tired, more like drained, it had been one hell of a day. As he started to climb the stairs, something he saw from the corner of his eye caught his attention. In the corner of the hall, by the front door lay a half eaten mouse. A legacy of the black cat.

Funny, he hadn't noticed it earlier, but then again, he hadn't noticed anything earlier. He went to the kitchen to get a pan and brush. He wasn't one of those people who could just go over to it, grab it by the tail and hurl it out, dead or not, no way was he going to touch it. Just as he bent down to scoop up the half consumed dinner, the blood clotted, micky like face turned and looked up at him.

"Well buddy, you're getting there, but you've still a long way to go." It gave a little wink then fell back into place.

"Hell, I really must be going mad!" John exclaimed, scooping up the mouse and hurling it as far as he could across the front lawn.

Virtualventures

John was shopping at the local store when he happened to glance up from the frozen meals, and across the other end of the shop stood Sindy, as large as life. She sported a nasty black eye, but apart from that she seemed okay, so he had been right, she had got up and done a runner. The nagging image of the cat crossed his mind, but he brushed that aside easily.

He called her name, and although half the stores customers turned to look at him, Sindy didn't seem to hear. Using his trolley as a battering ram, he darted towards her. But every time he got to another aisle she was nowhere to be seen. He was about to give up when he saw her leaving the store. Abandoning his shopping, he quickly followed her.

He finally caught up with her as she was getting into the lift that lead to the upstairs car park. He pushed in beside her. They were alone in the lift.

"Hey Sindy, just what the hell's going on, I run you down, and when I look there is this bloody cat in your place, and you are nowhere to be seen!" He blurted out, the words tumbling over each other.

He realised just how daft he sounded, but things were going over so fast in his mind that the words just weren't coming out as he meant them to.

"Well buddy, I'd like to tell you, but we've still got a long way to go."

Until now, John had avoided looking at her, but when he heard the voice he shot round to stare at Sindy, but it wasn't Sindy, it was a giant mouse, and it looked the worse for wear. White maggots were crawling in and out of the hanging flesh wounds, and as John watched repulsed, a handful fell by his feet and started squirming around his boots.

He tried to back away but the mouse like thing followed him step by step. He didn't realise the thing was so big, or at least it felt big. He smelt the rotting corpse and closed his eyes tight and told himself that it wasn't really happening, it was just another one of his dreams, but as much as he told himself it was a dream he still couldn't help feeling trapped, powerless.

He tried to raise his arms to ward off the revolting rodent, but couldn't, he had no command over them at all.

"Well buddy, what you going to do, what you going to do to stop me?" The rodent mocked.

John could feel its whiskers against his cheek, they felt like tiny razors. He watched in horror as the thing laid its claws on his shoulders and slowly started to stroke his chin with a large, curled talon.

John was suddenly aware of pain, and the hot blood trickling down his neck. The Sindy-mouse noticed, and stooped its head to suck on the escaping fluid. It was all too much for John; he felt his stomach roll over twice, then the bile rising in his throat.

He vomited all over the rat thing, but unlike the last time he emptied his guts, it didn't disappear, it seemed to look hurt, and as he watched the rat's head took on the form of the black cat for an instant, then for a brief moment it was Sindy, then everything went dark, and John felt himself being pulled by some sort of invisible

Cord.

When John opened his eyes he was where he expected to be. In his bed. Another bloody nightmare. But although it had been unpleasant, he was no longer scared by his dreams; in fact he welcomed them in an odd way. He knew that there was a message in them, but what message, and from whom?

He glanced down at his covers and saw a grim reminder once more of the dream. He was suddenly aware of something trickling down his neck, raising a finger he gingerly inspected the gash on his chin. So that much at least was real, and so too was the half eaten mouse that was almost hidden beneath the recent vomit.

A phrase that he had heard as a kid, and always stuck with him, came to mind. He didn't know who had said it, but it was a good saying, and one he had often used when he had no answer. He spoke the words aloud, as though they were some magical spell. "Is life a dream, or are dreams a reality?" In this case he sure didn't know.

He got dressed, and then slung the mouse out of the window, not waiting to see where it would land he lumbered downstairs. He thought about breakfast, but his protesting, tender stomach made it quite clear that any food was as welcome as a dose of the pox.

He felt that he should rebel against his gut feeling, but a heavy knocking on the door, announcing the arrival of Roy made the decision for him. Glancing at his watch, John saw that it was only a little after seven. Roy sure didn't like hanging about, John mused.

Silently Roy handed the thicker set of files to John and proceeded in the direction of the kitchen.

"I'll make a brew while you get started on those," he shouted back over his shoulder.

John didn't argue, but entered the front room, fell into the nearest chair and was quickly engrossed in the files. Roy didn't interrupt once; he just eyed John every now and then.

"Well they're pretty much the same as the recent cases," John conceded at last, slamming them on the table, "peoples kids from all walks of life, but were any of them ever found?"

"No, they all just vanished off the face of the earth, so to speak. we had a few calls from people saying that they had seen one or other of them in different parts of the country, but nothing ever came of it, so we can't be sure whether it was any of them or not."

"So they are all still listed as missing?"

"That's the official statement, but in my mind I have no doubt that they are all dead."

John eyed Roy thoughtfully, he noticed it sounded like a press release, devoid of any emotions what so ever, unlike how het up he had got last night.

"And these recent reports of missing kids, is it your opinion that they are dead too?"

Roy hesitated a moment before answering, "Yes"

"Well if that is the case we had better catch this son of a bitch before he kills any more!"

"You can be sure of that, son."

John stared at Roy a moment; there was something in the tone of his voice that troubled him. A thought suddenly hit him, but it didn't seem possible.

"Do you," he began slowly, "think that the same person is responsible for these recent events as well as the past?"

He half expected to be laughed at, or even rebuked for such a stupid idea, but instead Roy simply nodded.

"But how could that be, and why wait so long to start killing these kids again, if they are dead?"

"I don't know, I've been asking all these questions myself, but I've nothing else to go on."

John sensed the desperation in his voice, "okay, so what do we do?"

"Well I've got a lead, the school janitor seems to be a link between them all, and what's more, he's been at the school for over thirty years now."

"Before," John began, "you said you were sure that he was going to kill again, why?"

"I can't really be sure, but thirty years ago there were thirteen kids that went missing, thirteen that we know for sure were linked, then it just stopped. So if it is the

same person, he could be going for the same number, it might mean something to him." Roy shrugged feebly.

"Gee Roy, no offence, but isn't that a bit of a long shot?"

"It's a hell of a long shot, but I've got to work on that assumption, there are lives involved here."

"But so far, only seven have gone missing, if you are right, then he's going after another six, and we haven't a bloody clue that they're going to be."

"That's right, Jonnie boy," Roy gave a half hearted wink, "so we better get on overtime, that is, if you're in?"

"Oh, I'm in," John snapped, "but we could be looking for a woman."

"We could." Roy replied, his tone making it clear that they weren't.

He needed a case that would take his mind off the recent events. Even if it was slightly connected. It was a pity about Sindy, he would have liked to get to know her better, but that was the story of his life, if someone he liked came along he would go and blow it. He hadn't been out with anyone since Carol left him. Although he had tried, he still hadn't forgiven her for that, after all he wasn't completely to blame, it was his work. He had to work, and yes the hours were long, but she had known that when she had moved in with him.

After all, being a detective wasn't a nine to five job, and it wasn't as shady as she had tried to make out. In the end her constant snide remarks and comments had made it so hard for him to face that he would have to have at least four pints inside him before he could bear to be in the same room as her. And however shady his job was, he was good at it, so he was surprised when she thought he wouldn't find out about her fancy man. It sure felt good when he broke the guys jaw, but that stunt just about sealed the fate of their somewhat dodgy relationship.

When John and Roy got to the school, there received a frosty reception from the headmaster, he wasn't sure it would be alright to interview the janitor on school grounds, and in school time.

"Listen you son of a bitch!" Roy spat out into the small, podgy, sweating face of the now not so cocky headmaster, "we're investigating the whereabouts of six kids who have disappeared, they might even be dead, and so unless you want us to drag your sorry arse down to the station, I suggest that you give us all the help you can!"

The little man was shaking all over, Roy's words sinking in deep. Pressing the intercom he quickly sent for the janitor.

When John saw the man enter the room, his first thought was that there was no way that this could be the person they were after. The janitor had a severe limp, and only one arm. He was also no bigger than five feet tall.

But if Roy had any such doubts he never let it show, he was on the man as soon as he entered the room, spitting questions at him so fast that he had no time to answer any of them.

John felt sorry for the poor retch standing in front of him, who finally broke down in tears under Roy's unrelenting bombardment.

He gripped hold of Roy's arm and whispered in his ear with just enough menace, "That's enough, do you want a complaint going in before we've even started?" Roy reared round, and his eyes were like blazing black coals. For an instant, John thought he was going to swing for him, then the madness was gone, and Roy went storming out the door without another word. John managed a hollow smile at the snivelling man before following after him.

Roy was waiting outside with a face like thunder, "don't ever interfere again when I'm questioning a suspect!" he raged. John just nodded; he decided that to say anything would only make it worse. But he still didn't think the janitor was their man and what was more, he had the feeling that Roy didn't believe he was either, it was just that he wanted to nail someone so badly that he was desperately living in hope. It was at this moment that John remembered his trip up to the field, and the remains of the fire he had found. He told Roy, and his anger flooded away and was replaced by a new found urgency

As soon as they were on the other side of the gate, the headaches came back and pounded the back of John's skull. The skies had turned a dull slate grey, and it was only a matter of time before the heavens opened and threw down all it had at them.

"It's no far now," John announced, turning to Roy. Was it the light or was Roy getting younger? As they drew nearer to the spot, John could see a small fire burning. Roy put his finger to his lips, and they moved in closer. There was a figure bent over something, and as they watched they could see that what ever it was, it was struggling. As they edged nearer John could see that the struggling creature was a child. Rage welled up in him, and without thinking he let out an angry snarl and leapt towards the dark figure.

But the stranger had heard him and rose to its full height and turned to greet John. And he was suddenly face to face with the killer from his dreams, skins, snakes skull and all.

But he knew that this was no dream, as the thing lifted him off his feet and hurled him against the nearest tree. The impact sent shockwaves throughout his entire body, and he slumped to the ground, mist already clouding his eyes.

But before the blackness came, he had time to see Roy sneaking up behind the thing, and with a hollow thud, he brought his torch down full onto the nightmares head, sending the snakes head one way and the figure sprawling across the orange flames of the dying fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

John felt as though he had been hit by a runaway train, just about every bone in his body ached, and in places he hadn't known could do. He felt the ground beneath him tremble, he tried to open his eyes but they felt as though they had been stuck together with super glue. He reached up to rub them, but found that no matter how hard he tried he was unable to move.

Panic flooded through him, and he was relieved to feel his eyelids pop open. At first he was looking through a very heavily woven net curtain, but as his eyes started to focus the net curtain slowly dissolved, and he found himself gazing into a pair of blood shot green eyes.

"How ya feeling fella?" The green eyed ambulance man asked.

"Where am I, where are you taking me?" John enquired, confused. But before the man had a chance to answer, John remembered. He remembered the beast from his dreams, he remembered the Childs cries, and he remembered Roy laying the son of a bitch out cold.

"How's the child?" he asked, trying to sit up, but feeling the straps biting into his arms.

"Don't fret about the child, you should be more concerned about yourself, you took one hell of a blow."

It was as though his words were a sign, and a sharp pain shot down John's spine so suddenly that it yanked his head back, and as this happened his teeth clenched on the fleshy part of his cheek, and he tasted the coppery blood.

He must have passed out again, for when he next opened his eyes he was in a bright, white room, and two figures hovered over him.

The nurse smiled shyly at him, but the doctor just eyed him coldly and went back to reading the chart he held in his unsteady hands. I wonder if these guys a surgeon, John mused absently.

"Right, it looks as though we'll be having the pleasure of your company for a day or so, Mr Lowe," the doctor rasped without taking his eyes off the chart.

Was that whisky he could smell? Surly not. "Call me John, all my friends do."

"You can get some rest now, we'll be doing some tests later Mr Lowe." the man retorted, making it clear that he had no intention of being one of his friends.

"Hey, just a minute, I've got a job to do; I can't just lay about in here!" John yelled after the retreating white clad scrawny figure, but the doctor didn't seem to hear him and disappeared from sight before John could release another protest.

"You best get some rest," the nurse smiled, "although your back isn't broken, we still have some more tests to do."

John was puzzled, "how do you know my back isn't broken?"

"We x-rayed you when you were brought in. Now you settle down, I'll be back later."

So old, red eyes shot something in me to make me sleep, isn't that just dandy, John mused. After the nurse left he realised that a rest wasn't such a bad idea after all, the pain was beginning to subside a little, but a rest would do no harm.

His eyes slowly focused on the swinging overhead light. The room no longer looked white, it was more like a white whipped with a bucket of blood, then smeared across the plaster in large patches.

A strange sound caught his attention; it was a sort of scrapping noise, followed by a thud, then a ping. He pulled himself gingerly out of bed, and then cautiously peered round the door. The corridor was empty.

He followed the noise until he came to the end of the corridor and reached a set of fire doors. He pushed the doors apart and the origin of the strange sound was revealed to him.

The lift doors were opening and closing, only they didn't close all the way, that was the answer to the thumping sound. A pair of legs was sticking out of the lift preventing the doors from shutting properly.

John reached the lift in a few easy strides. He stared down into the unseeing eyes of the pretty nurse. Suddenly he heard footsteps behind and swirled to see the monster from his nightmares coming towards him, dragging the limp body of the frail doctor by the hair.

Virtualventures

"I hear you're not feeling so good, you need to see a doctor?" The thing mocked, pulling the worn out doctor over his head and throwing him at John like some old trash bag. The body landed full force on him, knocking him flat and forcing a loud rasp from his lungs.

He suddenly felt suffocated and started beating blindly at the body with his fists.

"Take it easy, you're alright, you're alright!"

His eyes snapped open and he found himself looking up into the troubled eyes of the young nurse.

Another bloody dream. The thing was mocking him. But it was no dream what happened last night, and he had seen Roy laid the thing flat, so Roy must have him, he had to be real, and he couldn't have escaped. It was about time he went and faced his unknown tormentor.

But before he could leave he would be subjected to a complete once over. Not for his sake, but to protect the hospital if he insisted on leaving, and he insisted!

After a few tests and a few needles and prods he was given the all clear. The pain in his back had turned into a steady throb, but he could live with that just as long as he got out of the hospital. He had always reasoned that if you stayed in a hospital to long, then you would only get worse!

When he walked into the police station, Roy was a bit surprised to see him; he thought that John would be kept in overnight at least.

"How you feeling son?" the concerned cop rushed to help him as though he was an invalid, "you took one hell of a knock."

"You caught the son of a bitch, didn't you? Tell me you've still got him," John pleaded.

The concern quickly vanished from the granite face, and was replaced by a broad smile, "we've still got him."

"And the kid, what about the kid?" Everything had happened so fast the previous night that John suddenly realised he didn't know if the child was a girl or a boy.

"I'm sorry John, but there was nothing we could do for him, he'd been dead at least ten hours before we arrived."

Roy's words hung in the air, and John felt his stomach tighten, rage building up inside.

"Then what the hell was that freak doing up there, torturing a dead body? He hadn't been up there for ten hours working on the corpse, had he?" John gasped.

"No, the guys sick, but someone would surely have seen him if he had been there that long."

"Do you know who the boy was?"

"Yes, his name was on our missing person files," Roy shook his head sadly, "I've just had the task of informing his parents, and that's not a bloody nice job, I can tell you!"

"I'm sorry Roy," John murmured, not really knowing what to say, "But we're lucky, this is the first time that we've found a body."

"Lucky!!" Roy yelled, "lucky, tell that to the poor bastards parents!"

John watched as the big man circled the room, hitting his palm with his rock like fist.

"I'm sorry John," he sighed, deflated, "you're right of course, if we hadn't stumbled on to him when we did, this boy would still be on the missing persons list thirty years from now."

This comment wasn't wasted on John, "has he confessed to any of the others?"

"Confessed, he hasn't even confessed to this one!" Roy snarled, his voice rising once more.

"What!" John gasped, his voice rising also, unable to believe what he was hearing, "we caught him red handed!"

"We know that, but in this sick fucks head we didn't."

"Can I see him?"

Roy led John down to the cells, and stood to one side, pushing the door open. The smell hit him.

"What's that bloody stink?" John spat, covering his nose with the back of his hand.

"Oh that, that's our guest, he has a habit of shitting himself." Roy grinned, not bothering to cover his nose.

John walked slowly down the narrow passage flanked on both side by cells, he was sniffing his way to the cell he wanted.

He stopped outside a heavy door, letting Roy pull the cover back so that he could look inside. At first all he could see was a hunched figure in the far corner of the small room. Just a bundle of rags. As he watched, the bundle of rags moved, and then got slowly to its feet.

The first thing that hit John was the man's size, he was about five eight at the very most. But the thing from his dreams, and the thing that he had seen last night was a bloody human tower, at least six eight. He could be stooping, but there was another difference as well. The man before him wasn't any where near as wide either. The rambling figure turned to face him. John gasped. The face that he saw belonged not to a monster, but to a sad, rough old tramp. The tramp looked scared and confused.

"Why am I here, what ya want from me?" he pleaded, throwing himself at the door, almost into Johns face. John took a step back, "what is this, who is this?" he stammered.

Roy looked puzzled, and then stared through the hatch, as if making sure, "this is the guy we caught last night."

"No! No way," John shook his head, "this isn't the man I saw."

Roy slammed the hatch back in place and then led John roughly out of the corridor.

"What the hell are you saying have you gone mad?" he snarled, kicking the door shut behind with a loud crash.

"Roy, I saw the guy last night, he was taller, and he was a bloody lot wider for Christ sake!" John hissed, searching the old cops face for any sign that this might be some sort of test or something.

"I don't know what you think you saw, but I saw that guy pick you up and hurl you against a tree, I hit him, for crying out loud, he's got one hell of a gash on his head to prove it," Roy shouted, eyes blazing. Then his face softened and he placed a gentle hand on Johns shoulder.

"Look John, I know you're probably a little mixed up still, maybe you should go home and get some sleep I'll call round later."

"Yea maybe you're right," John sighed; he was starting to doubt what he had seen.

Maybe he was seeing his nightmare in everything that happened. But even so, he found it hard to believe that the tramp in the cell was the same man who had lifted him off his feet and thrown him ten feet through the air. They did say that madmen had the strength of ten men, but still!

"So he's been charged with murder then?"

"Too bloody right, and there's a hearing tomorrow to make sure he ain, t going nowhere, I've got a lot more questions for this arsehole." The look in Roy's eyes made John glad that he wouldn't be anywhere round at the time.

Before going home, he called in at the office to see if any new cases had come in, or if there was any call about this old one. Some guy had called by the name of Mitch Stone. He hadn't given a clue what it was about, but he had left a contact number.

"This might be another case, maybe I can even get back to normal things like wife watching." John moaned to the answering machine. He dialed the number and waited. After about ten rings it was picked up by a cheerful voice on the other end, "Hello, Mitch Stone, daily news."

John slammed the phone back down hard, "bloody reporters," he snarled, "I guess I'm going to be bugged by them all day."

He left the office and headed for home, not before he had made another tape for the answering machine though, "Hello, I'm John Lowe, please state your name and business after the tone, unless you're a reporter, then the second words off, take your pick what the first one is."

When he reached home he was in two minds whether to go back and change the tape, it was childish, but hell, he really didn't like reporters.

He had had a few bad write ups by the press when his cases didn't go the way he had planned, and that had happened a few more times than he would have liked. They would come round all nicely, nicely to get his side of the story, and then always paint him as a bad guy and just print what they liked. As far as they were concerned, he was a low life just like them!

After a hot bath he felt a lot better. The aches had almost gone, only when he moved to quickly was he reminded of his tender back.

He poured himself a brandy, and putting on a CD, he fell into the nearest chair. He had only been in the house a day or so without music, and that was a day or so too many. He had found a cheap CD player in a discount store in town and even found a couple of good c.ds too to go with the collection he had brought with him. A part of his worldly goods, ha!

It was a bit early to drink, and he normally wouldn't at this time, but he felt that he had a right to; he had earned this drink, and the next couple he was going to have after it.

As the brandy warmed his body, a welcoming haze dropped across his eyes and a hundred voices started chattering inside his mind.

He really was starting to think that the best thing he could do was to pack up and get the hell out of here. He had had this thought before and always talked himself out of it, but now, well he wasn't putting up a very good defence for staying, maybe it was the brandy.

He was beginning to reflect that maybe he never really had a case, that maybe Sindy never existed, maybe she was just another part of his dreaming, that maybe he needed professional help, maybe he was on the brink of one hell of a breakdown. A lot of maybe's!

But he had seen old, man Woods, and he was real. Was real, not anymore, someone had seen fit to kill him, but why? He was just an old man, maybe he really did know the killer, and John had led him there, led him to where Henry was hiding, maybe he was responsible for his death. There were those maybes again.

John had had more than just another couple of drinks by the time Roy arrived. Seeing the state he was in, Roy just shook his head, declined a drink and sat opposite just watching him.

"What?" John finally slurred, "so I'm pissed, so what, I had a bad night okay!"

"Yea, I know John, so did I, I've had no sleep, but hell, I thought I'd call in and see how you were doing."

"Oh I'm doing just dandy, no need to worry about me."

"You're going to be hounded by the press," Roy began, "and if you tell them what you told me it won't help our case."

"Oh don't worry Roy; you've got your killer, you're sure of that, so that's fine by me. It was dark like you said, I really couldn't see him. No, if you say he is the guy, then he's our man." John lied, he had seen him alright, but it just wasn't the face the tramp wore.

"Well I'm glad about that." Roy sighed, visibly relieved, "let's put this to rest once and for all."

"Put it to rest, you're not trying to tell me you think he was the same guy thirty years ago?" John asked startled.

"We don't think, we know. The son of a bitch admitted it." Roy grinned, arrogantly.

"Well you must feel pretty damn good, you've cracked the case single handily, so we can all sleep soundly tonight!" John spat, sarcastically.

Anger and hurt shot across Roy's face, and he got up to leave.

"I'm sorry!" John blurted out, grabbing the old cops arm, "I really am sorry, I've had too much to drink and I'm not thinking straight."

The hard features slowly crumbled, the chisel chin dropped and a broad smile spread the entire width of Roy's face, "don't worry kid, I understand, but you're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?" John asked, puzzled.

"I didn't do it single handily, I had your help!"

John was lying in bed, drifting in and out of sleep; he was tormented by the old tramps face. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't picture him as a killer. Not now, and not thirty years ago. Sure he could have been a killer thirty years ago, but something inside kept telling him that there was no way.

Flashbacks kept invading his mind. Sindy being knocked down, the beast torturing the boy, the events from his past, things he had forgotten. His mother and father fighting, and although he could see his mother's face clearly, so clear he could reach out and touch her, he still couldn't see his fathers face. All he could see was the huge size of him.

Suddenly a heavy knock on the front door brought him back to reality.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming!" John yelled, grabbing his dressing gown, and taking the stairs two at a time. He threw open the door and was greeted by a broad, smiling face.

"Do you know what bloody time it is?" John screamed, not knowing the time himself.

"I'm sorry about this mr Lowe, but I've been trying to get hold of you for some time," the grin said, getting even wider.

John suddenly knew who it was standing on his front step, "didn't you get the message?" he hissed.

"I know, I know," the reporter said, holding his hands up in mock surrender," but please just hear me out."

There was something in the man's voice that stopped John from slamming the door into the annoying grin. He still felt groggy from the brandy, but he agreed to hear him out, and then he would throw him out, John mused.

"Oh by the way, I thought of one, how about piss?"

Ah, the answering machine, John grinned and led the way to the front room.

"It was a bit childish I admit, but, well, you know."

"Yea I know alright, we're not the worlds most loved people," the reporter grinned.

That's an understatement, John thought, and despite himself, he was beginning to warm to the man.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Mitch Stone," the reporter offered an out stretched hand.

"I'm John Lowe," they shook hands, "now what can I do for you that seems so urgent that it can't wait till morning?"

"Well I believe that you were there when Sergeant Jones made the arrest."

"Made what arrest?" John asked, coyly.

"We know that he's got a man for the murder of Lee Philips, and that he's been charged with molesting the other kids who have gone missing in this area," the reporter said, in a well rehearsed monotone.

"Look Mitch, you don't mind if I call you Mitch ?" the reporter waved his hand, "well Mitch, it's like this, I'm not really at liberty to discuss the case," John whispered low, and with meaning, "besides, you seem to know a lot more about the case than me."

Which was true, John hadn't known that the murdered boys name was Lee Philips, the press really did have a way of finding things out.

"I know you're not supposed to talk about it, but this really is important. Was the man they are charging the man you saw?"

John heard his breath expel and felt as though he had been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. Why was this reporter questioning him about the very thing that he'd been asking himself about?

"It was dark, I can't be sure," John blurted out without thinking.

The reporter looked hard at him for a moment, no more trace of that irritable grin, "well I'll take that as a no."

"Now, I didn't say that!" John yelled, anger rising.

"You didn't have to."

"Okay, what's this all about?" John sighed.

"We need to know whether the man they arrested is really the man who committed the murder."

"Why would you doubt that he is the man?" John asked, trading question for question.

Mitch stood up and started pacing the room. Finally he must have reached a decision, "if I tell you this you're not to tell anyone, not anyone!" Mitch hissed, giving his words meaning.

"Hey, you got my word."

"Well I got a tip off that the man they've got isn't the killer."

"You get these cranks calling all the time," John answered, disappointed that that was all there was to it.

"This isn't a crank, I know the person, and well, they don't go round making things up," Mitch said, in almost a whisper, "and they'll state their life that they saw sergeant Jones drag out an old tramp in the middle of the night, hit him across the back of the head, and dragged him away. Now is this the man they are charging?"

John was stunned, he kept wondering if there was more than one witness by the way Mitch kept saying they.

"Because if it is," Mitch continued," then this was three hours after you were supposed to have arrested him up in the field !" Mitch let his words sink in, "and another thing, haven't you asked yourself why Sergeant Jones seems to be in charge of this case, and not C.I.D.?"

Virtualventures

CHAPTER NINE.

John stared hard at the stranger who had invaded his home at such a late hour and thrown his mind into turmoil. He flung himself out of the chair and started to almost march and almost stumble round the room, stopping only occasionally to stare at the reporter, whose eyes were glued on every move he made. But the reporter was making no effort to speak; he was giving John time to chew things over.

"I'm going to make a drink, do you want one?" John suddenly asked harshly.

"Yea, that would be fine, a coffee thanks," the reporter muttered meekly.

When John had left the room, Mitch gazed slowly round at the old furnishings. The room felt cold, it didn't feel lived in. Suddenly he felt an icy chill crawl down his spine, it started from the top and slowly clawed its way down. Mitch could feel the perspiration well up, and trickle down his forehead.

He felt as though the room was trying to choke him, and was about to get up and get the hell out of there when just as suddenly it disappeared, leaving his heart pumping so hard it felt as if it would explode.

The door opened and John re-entered the room, handed Mitch his drink and flopped into the seat opposite. They sat in silence. Everything was so jumbled up in John's head that he couldn't make any sense of any of it. What was this man sitting in front of him trying to say? That Roy had gone out into the street and picked up some bum, charged him with the whole bunch of kids that had disappeared, and the ones from thirty years ago thrown in for good measure. Shit, he just couldn't swallow it.

But if it was true, then what had happened to the nightmare freak that John had seen Roy drop?

"Look," Mitch began, "I know that this cops a friend of yours, but I can assure you that I'm not mistaken on this."

"Listen, I'm just not sure I can take any of this seriously, as you've said, he is my friend, and I think its only fair that I can see some proof of what you say."

As John finished his short sermon, he thought, sure he's my friend, or at least I think he's my friend, but just how well do I know him? The answer was, not well at all.

He was just a memory from a long lost youth, from a million years ago. The fact that John had hit it off with him was simple. He needed a friend, and Roy came along at the right time and fitted in nicely as that friend. And although he didn't want to believe what this man was saying about Roy, the truth was he knew that the man in the cells was not the man from the previous night. And however much he tried to explain this to himself, he just couldn't come up with a good enough answer, except that he was going mad, and he wasn't about to admit to that just yet.

"Okay, lets say I believe you, what do you want me to do, stand up and say- hey that's not the man, that's some poor bum John dragged off the street- and everyone would just believe me!" John's voice rose in despair.

"Wow, take it easy," Mitch cried, holding up his hands, "I know that no one's going to believe your word against- err - Roy's," he was barely able to say the name, he would much have preferred to say - the pigs - but he had to trod carefully so as not to upset John any further.

"But why wouldn't they believe me?" John asked, with mock hurt.

"So all we can do for now, is do nothing."

"What do you mean, do nothing? Why the hell come round here if all you wanted was to do nothing!" John gasped.

"I know, but as you pointed out, it's your word against his, and he would come up with at least a dozen reasons why you're no good as a witness. So you've got to play along with him, and watch what he's up to."

There was a pregnant pause before John asked, " so what about the bum in the cells, are we just going to let him go down for this while the killers still out there?"

"That's just what we're going to do," Mitch noticed the startled expression on John's face, "I know, I sound bloody heartless, but as you said, the killers still out there, and our friend Roy knows more than he's letting on."

"I suppose you're right," John admitted, defeated, "but we'll have to be careful so as not to alert him, if there's one thing he's not, that's stupid."

Mitch left his home number in case John needed to reach him out of office hours, and bade him goodnight, leaving John with a hundred and one things crashing through his mind.

After a restless night, John was woken by a heavy thumping on the door. He had lain there for a good five minutes without realising what it was.

He threw on his dressing gown and almost tumbled down the stairs. He opened the door and the cold morning air washed through him, sending a shudder down his spine.

"Ah, so you are still in the land of the living," Roy chuckled, stepping into the hallway without waiting to be invited.

"Only just," John replied, rubbing the cobwebs from his eyes.

"I think you sank a few too many last night boys."

"You don't have to tell me that, I've got a constant reminder hammering away at the back of my skull," John mumbled, sulkily, leading the way into the front room, "so what you got planned for today, Roy?"

"Well I thought we would go back up to the field and take a real good look around, see if there is any small thing that doesn't look right."

"Okay, you got it," John said eagerly. He was glad of the chance to go back up to the field, he knew that the answer lay up there somewhere and he was going to find it if it was the last thing he did. Also he wanted to see how Roy acted up there, and he would be able to befriend him again and try and regain his confidence.

It was just getting light when they reached the gate, John found himself slowing down the closer they came to it. Roy was the first over the gate, and as he landed he was almost trotting along. As John watched, he seemed to fade and the mist swirled up and swallowed him. His stomach churned, but he vaulted the gate and landed on the wet grass on the other side.

The familiar sick feeling hit him at once, but he ignored it and in a few long strides he was beside the cop.

"What do you think we'll find up here?"

"Well boy, I'm not rightly sure what we'll find, but I have a feeling that something's up here."

Yea, you and me both, John thought. And as he studied the old cops face, he started to doubt that he could have anything to do with this nightmare.

As John watched, Roy strolled over to a clearing in the trees and began to scratch at the surface with his foot.

"Hey, I think I've found something," Roy exclaimed.

John couldn't believe it, they had only been in the field a few minutes, and here they were, already stumbling onto something. If he had any doubts about Roy before, they had completely gone now.

Did he really come across as that stupid? Roy hadn't even put any heart into the little show of his. And what he didn't realise, or care about, was that he had already searched this area with a fine tooth comb and came up empty handed.

"What is it?" John asked, trying to put as much enthusiasm into his voice as he could.

"This earths been dug up recently. Someone's tried to hide the fact, but I can tell."

"What do you think we should do?" John asked what he knew Roy wanted him to ask, may as well play his little game.

"Well I'm tempted to get a shovel and see what's down there, but I think it would be best if we called it in."

John couldn't help but notice the WE part. So here he was, ready to back up Roy's tale again. If Mitch hadn't told him his story, John might have thought that Roy was just one hell of a cop, but now that he knew, even Colombo couldn't have got this far so quick.

As these thought entered his head, he suddenly felt a rolling sensation in the pit of his stomach.

He was a good ten yards in front of Roy; he couldn't wait to get out of the field. He didn't know why he was always ill when he visited the place, but he knew that the longer he spent in it the worse he felt. And he also knew that the longer he spent in it, the more explicit the nightmares were that always followed.

"Hey, hang on there boy, I'm not as fit as I used to be!"

"Sorry, but I want to get this call in, " John lied.

"I know, but we don't want to have a heart attack into the bargain," Roy laughed.

John was wondering just what was under that loose earth. An idea kept springing to mind, but he quickly pushed it as far back as he could. He didn't even want to accept that possibility.

But if it did come true, then Roy was into this shit right up to his head, and over, and John would make sure that he was there to see him buried.

John made a drink while Roy called in his report and requested some men with shovels. By the sound of his voice, he was having a tough time convincing his bosses about the need to dig up a piece of ground on what he could best describe as a hunch.

"If I'm wrong on this you can have my badge!" He snarled, slamming down the receiver. John had to do his best to keep from laughing, that line was just a little too much Hollywood.

While they were waiting for the team to arrive, they made a bit of small talk, but neither of them mentioned what might be under the disturbed earth. Under the circumstances, anyone else would be excited by the find, and having all kinds of wild ideas on what might be there.

But Roy was keeping tight lipped; it was as if he wasn't bothered. John was sure he was going through this charade, partly for his benefit, and partly for the investigation. They both heard the car drawing up and were out the door before it had time to come to a halt. Upon seeing them, Roy was a completely different man; he had suddenly taken on an air of urgency. He was ordering the men around with a surge of excitement. And his surge of excitement had rubbed off on them, they couldn't wait to get the tools out of the van, and get into the field.

John stood back and watched all this. He felt as though he had a first class ticket, and was the only one who had turned up for the show. It seemed the more he was around Roy, the more he had to learn.

He didn't know if Roy was a good cop, but he now realised he was one hell of an actor.

"Come on John; let's show them where it is." Roy yelled, his fake enthusiasm bubbling over, making John cringe. Reluctantly he fell in behind the circus. Once back up in the trees, Roy never faltered, he went straight over to the spot without hesitation. The eager men went right to work. John could tell by the speed they were going that they weren't policemen. They were local labours who were being paid a set price for the job no matter how long it took, and they were out to make sure that it didn't take too long.

As John watched, his belly did a thousand cartwheels, and his head started to thump, it felt as though hounded voices were all screaming to be heard at once.

"What's the matter boy?" Roy asked, taking a few easy strides to his side, "you sure look pale."

I wish he would cut that boy crap, "I don't feel too good, I'm sorry, I think I'll go back to the house."

"Okay then, I'll be in touch as soon as we find something."

Again John noticed the- as soon as we find something- not - IF we find something. He was also surprised that Roy hadn't made a fuss and insisted that he stayed, but then again, he had served his purpose.

John practically ran back down the field. His head felt like it would explode at any minute, and he could taste the bile rising in his throat. He hadn't realised just how far he had run until he fell headlong into the gate. Resting against the rough timber he tried to gather the strength to climb it.

Suddenly his mind was raped by a hundred voices all demanding him to come back. And now John had all the strength he needed, it was as though the gate didn't exist. Falling flat on his backside, he was up in an instant and without a backwards glance he ran over to the house, fumbled with his key, hit the latch, and fell inside, kicking the door shut behind trying to cut out the voices.

But the voices would not be shut out. He couldn't tell what they were trying to say, but they sounded tortured and twisted beyond anything he could imagine. He sank slowly to the floor and felt hot rivers flowing from his eyes. He didn't know why he was crying, but he knew that he must. He knew that he was crying for all those tortured souls. And he knew that the tortured souls were the victims of his nightmare. And somehow he had to do something to put those souls to rest.

And he was crying because he knew that he had no idea what it was he had to do. He didn't know how long he had been crouched behind the door, nor did he know when the voices subsided. He felt helpless and used and needed a friend more than anything. But he had no friends, no one he could just call up and talk to. And he had no love in his life, something that he suddenly missed; something that he knew would go a long way in helping him get through this thing.

He had hoped that Sindy was going to be a piece of his life, but now he wasn't even sure if there ever had been a Sindy. He decided to call the only person whom he could think came anywhere near a friend, and that was a hell of a long way away. After the thousandth dial tone, John was about to replace the receiver when a breathless voice answered,

"Hello, Mitch Stone speaking."

"You sound a bit knackered," John said easily, as though he was speaking to a life long pal.

"Hi John, I was just leaving when I heard the phone ring."

"Well the reason I'm calling is, well, err-"

"You've found something?"

"Well I don't know for sure."

John relayed his story to Mitch, leaving nothing out, not even his thoughts on the matter.

"I'll be right over, stay put."

John felt as though he had taken one step forward by just calling Mitch. He didn't know how Roy would react when he found out. On one hand, he might regard it as another notch to back up his story, and be glad the press was up there. He wouldn't get any grief because he hadn't called them.

But on the other hand, he might feel betrayed by John, and what little trust he might have in him would surely go right out the window.

So John didn't know how Roy was going to take it, but which ever way, it was too bloody late now.

Roy eyed the two figures approaching, he knew one was John, but who the hell was the other guy?

"Hi Roy, found anything?"

"You feeling better boy?" He replied, looking straight past John, his eyes locked on Mitch.

"Yea, a bit," John said, noticing the hostile look. "This is a friend of mine, Mitch Stone."

Roy made no attempt to shake the outstretched hand, " what the hells he doing up here?" Roy hissed, now completely ignoring Mitch.

"I thought he might be useful, you see he's a reporter."

The anger that suddenly filled Roy's face was so frightening that John took a couple of uneasy steps backwards.

Roy followed John's retreat, fists clenched, and his hot breath filling John's nostrils with a sour odour.

"And what the hell uses is a fucking reporter?" Roy's voice spat venom.

"I thought that it would back us up having a reporter on the spot when we find something to strengthen our case against that asshole we got locked up."

"It might not prove anything against him."

"I know, but I'm sure we might be able to swing it against him."

Roy's face suddenly lit up and a heavy wave of laughter ripped from him.

"Boy, I guess you got detective skills from me," he roared, slapping John's back, almost knocking the wind from him.

"We've found something!" One of the workmen yelled from the ever growing hole.

They quickly rushed over to the hole and watched as the workman scraped away with a pointing trowel at something white.

John knew what the white thing was straight away, and watched in slow motion as the object became a finger, and then a hand, and then the hand grew an arm as the digger prodded the earth away.

John could feel the voices in the back of his head cry out. He was suddenly aware of Mitch dancing round the pit, taking pictures from every possible angle. Funny, he couldn't remember seeing Mitch with a camera.

His eyes started to go in and out of focus, and he felt his knees weakening. A voice from behind was congratulating Roy on a good job. And he felt Roy's hand fall on his shoulder like a lead weight.

"Well I had a lot of help from this guy," Roy was saying.

John's eyes were transfixed by the hole and the white figure taking shape. Suddenly, as though giving birth, the earth opened up and a gleaming skull broke forth.

There was a sudden loud scream in the back of his mind, and his legs buckled, and he fell face first into the freshly dug earth. As his stomach lost control, the darkness came to claim him.

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CHAPTER TEN.

"Hey, are you alright bud?"

The words filtered through the thick haze like a distant chant.

"Come on, you're doing fine."

The words seemed to be coming from much closer now. He felt a slap and a slight stinging sensation on his cheek, and slowly opened his eyes to be confronted by a white blur. As his eyes adjusted the white blur became a concerned face.

"You gave me quite a turn then," Mitch beamed.

John remembered what had caused this blackout. He looked over to the trench, and saw two men in white coats closing a large black plastic bag. Turning his head, he saw at least half a dozen more plastic bags being placed into the back of a van.

"How long have I been out?" he asked climbing unsteadily to his feet.

"Almost forty minutes now."

"Bloody hell, that long!" John gasped.

"I know mate, that is a long time, much too long for an average blackout," Mitch said reading his thoughts, "I wanted to call an ambulance, but--"

"But I wouldn't let him," Roy broke in, "I know you're prone to these attacks."

John eyed him sharply, I bet you do, he thought.

"I don't feel so good, I think I'll go back to the house," John said, swaying visibly.

"I'll come with you," Mitch jumped in, "that's if it's okay with you?" he added, turning to Roy.

"It's okay; we're just about done here."

As they turned to walk away Roy shouted, "hey kid," they both turned to look at the big grinning red face, "Don't print anything until I give the word." then he put a smug thumb up.

John knew that Roy thought he had done Mitch a big favour by letting him have the exclusive on the story, it wasn't everyday that a small hick reporter got such a big scoop. And by the sheepish look on Mitch's face, he knew it.

"Hey look mate," he declared to John, "I know I've got a hell of a scoop, but I didn't latch on to you just for a story, I want to find the truth behind all these missing kids too."

"Relax, relax, I know you're not using me, if I thought you were you would be flat on your back by now." John laughed, throwing a playful punch.

"You look a lot better than you did a few minutes ago," Mitch observed.

They had reached the gate by this time, and John knew that he would be one hundred percent better as soon as they were on the other side of it.

"To tell the truth, the swaying back there was just an act, I just had to get away." John winked.

A bright ray of sunlight shone through the window, denying the fact that it was late November and it was bloody cold outside. They had been sitting in John's front room for over ten minutes and neither of them had said a word.

John finally broke the silence, "how many remains did they find in the trench?"

Mitch was startled by the sudden blunt question,

"Err- what?"

"How many children were there?" John repeated. But they weren't children, they were just bones, bones that had once had faces that had once walked, talked, laughed and cried. That had once had a life, until some sick bastard had taken it from them.

"They're not sure yet, they were in a right mess, but they reckon it's around twelve to thirteen."

"Were they all children?" John asked, knowing the answer, feeling his muscles tighten.

"It's almost certain." Mitch whispered.

John slumped back in his chair and rubbed his temples with his thumb and index finger. He let out a heavy sigh and shook his head slightly.

"I think we both know now for sure that Roy's in this thing up to his neck." Mitch stated.

"Yep. My guess is that they will trace the bones back to the kids who went missing thirty years ago."

"They certainly looked as though they had been in the ground that long."

"No! Not in that ground," John spat the words out.

"But I don't understand it," Mitch mused, "why would Roy take the remains from wherever they have been for the last thirty years and suddenly bury them up there, and then make out he had found them?"

"It is one hell of a risk, but I think he really wants to lynch the poor bum he's got stashed in the cells and put this thing to rest."

"He's trying to say he's the murderer of Lee Phillips, but he hasn't got any way of linking him with the other kids, and as for these ones from all of those years ago, there's just no way."

John regarded Mitch. For a reporter he sure was slow. "What he's trying to do, trying to make people believe, is that he got the location to dig from the bum, that the bum has finally come clean, confessed his sins, couldn't live with the knowledge any longer, and was now prepared to die with a clean slate."

"I realise this," Mitch said, steadily, "but how is he going to explain that the bum suddenly admitted to all the killings thirty years ago, admitted to killing Lee Phillips, and I assume the other kids who have gone missing, but hasn't told him where he has hid the other bodies." Mitch realised that he too was calling the old tramp a bum and mentally scolded himself.

John sat up, not so slow after all, that was one hell of a point, a point to which he wasn't sure of the right answer,

"Well Mitch, your guess is as good as mine, but maybe he's hoping that the way the public spirit goes, they won't see that. That they will be just glad to get the murderer and overlook the fact that he's not the real killer."

They sat in silence again, both trying to work out what was on Roy's mind. One thing was clear, that he knew about the killings thirty years ago, and he sure as hell knew about the kids who have gone missing recently.

Both Mitch and John were certain that the kids were all dead. There was no chance that they had just gone missing, run away from home and would turn up safe. John's heart went out to all the poor parents who were sitting at home by the phone, hoping, praying. He wanted to get Roy now, and he wanted it bad.

"We've got to do something," he rasped, breaking the silence, "just because he's pinning all this shit on that bum doesn't mean he's going to give up kidnapping and killing children!"

"So you're sure that it really is him that's doing it, that he's not helping, or covering up for someone?"

"Yea, I'm sure it's him!" John snapped. But he wasn't sure, in fact he knew that Roy wasn't in this thing by himself, but how the hell could he say - oh, he's got help, it's a brick shithouse from my dreams, he's the one I really saw killing the kid up in the field, not the bum, but he doesn't really exist, he's just a nightmare! And while we're at it, I think he's got a pal called Sindy, and they're playing some sort of game with me, shit, who knows, maybe you're a bloody dream too-

"What? What was that John?"

He suddenly realised that he had spoken the last words out loud, and Mitch was staring at him, puzzled.

"Sorry, I was just thinking out loud."

"Oh, right, just how much do you know about Roy?" Mitch said, dismissing John's sudden outburst.

"Well not a real lot, I remember he was a friend of my aunts. Now I think about it, they were probably lovers."

John told Mitch about her recent death and why he had come back to Buckley. Once he had started, he wished he could keep on going and tell Mitch about the dreams, the strange feelings he got when he entered the field, and just about everything else that had happened in his life. But he knew he couldn't, at least not now.

"When you went through your aunts things, did you find anything that might help?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know anything?" Mitch didn't know what, but maybe any little thing might give them a clue.

"I haven't really found anything of hers. When I arrived here, Roy had already dealt with most of the legal stuff, I was glad of it to be honest."

"What, are you telling me you never found anything in the attic?"

"The attic, I haven't been up there."

"You haven't been up in the attic!" Mitch repeated, in mock disbelief, "there's always good treasure to be found in the attics of these old buildings."

John knew when he had cleaned the house out, when he had first arrived, and found nothing, no personal effects of his aunt, or his parents, or anything that would indicate that any of his family had ever lived in the building, that there would be a good chance of things up in the attic that would throw a light on the past.

He got slowly to his feet and stood swaying to and fro, as if he had just taken one giant step for mankind. Mitch sensed his reluctance to move.

"What is it? You look as though you expect to find some attic dwelling, blood sucking, horned and tailed monster."

John let out a short forced laugh, "maybe you're not that far wrong," he muttered, feeling a flock of butterflies doing the tango in the pit of his stomach. "It's just that I haven't been up there for thirty years, I used to hide up there as a kid, and well, you know--" he let the sentence slide, suddenly feeling stupid.

"I know mate, ghosts in the closet and all that. If you want me to wait down here, I don't mind." Mitch lied, he did bloody mind, after the feeling he had had before, and he didn't want to spend any time alone in this bloody house.

"No, I would feel better with you there." John said, to Mitch's relief, "I don't know what we're going to find up there, but it'll probably mean just as much to you as it would to me, as I've said, I've been away a long time and I don't remember a lot."

But John could recall a great deal more than he was letting on.

After a quick rummage round in the shed, they came out with a pair of really old wooden stepladders. John didn't like the look of the rotten things, so he was weighing up the idea of letting Mitch go first.

But by the time they reached the top of the stairs, he had decided that he would be the one to go first. The hatch to the attic was just off to the right as they reached the landing, and before John had time to think, Mitch had set the ladders up, climbed up and removed the cover.

He made no attempt to look in side. In stead he climbed back down, held the bottom rung with his foot, and leaned to one side to let John pass.

"I've just thought of something," John chirped, "we haven't got a bloody torch!"

"There might be a switch in the attic," Mitch said, "give it a try, if not I've got a torch in the car."

John nodded, went quickly up the ladder, and stuck his head through the gaping hole. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark, and then he slowly glanced round at the shadows at the far end.

As he watched they seemed to dance towards him, but he knew that it was just a trick of his imagination. He noticed a switch to his left and was surprised when the attic lit up as he flicked it, giving out a dull yellow glow.

He hadn't noticed the smell when he first stuck his head into the loft space, but now it washed completely over him, filling every pore in his body, and sending a sickly feeling cascading to his head, he took a deep breath and struggled to keep the bile down.

"Everything alright?" A small voice asked from the foot of the ladder.

"Yea, I'm just getting used to the stink."

But the old decaying stench of rot and damp was one that you just couldn't get used to. Slowly John grabbed the sides of the hatch and threw himself into the next world. Suddenly childhood memories came crashing back to him. He remembered how he used to climb up into this strange world when his mum and dad argued, something that now he thought about it, happened regularly.

He recalled the games he would play in his own private universe. In a kingdom that didn't have any grown ups, no one to hit him for no reason, no one to yell at him until he burst into tears, and then got the belt for being a sissy. He clenched his teeth as this memory came flooding in, he could almost feel the lashes once more, and hear the awful- whooshing- sound it made as it tore through the air.

John glanced round the boarded floor. The dust was at least an inch deep, nobody had been in his world for a long time, maybe, he thought, nobody had been up here since him. But he knew that that wasn't so. Shivers suddenly shot down his back and he felt an icy chill blow across his face.

A voice calling his name filled him with a sudden panic; he swung round and saw a white face staring at him just over the rafters.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Mitch almost pleaded.

"No come on up." John replied, in an awful imitation of Leslie Crowther.

He heard a groan as Mitch clambered in. He wasn't sure if it was a groan from exertion, or a response to his crappy impersonation.

"Well there sure is a lot of stuff up here." Mitch gasped.

John thought that what he meant to say was a whole lot of crap. And he agreed. A lot of the things, he could remember, like the tatty old three wheeler bike slung in the far corner like some relic of a time gone past. It had always been tatty, even when he had first got it.

He also recalled the stick he had to take when he went out on it, all the other kids his age had proper two wheelers. But he hadn't cared, to him his was a world war two tank, and he could blow their shitty little bikes into kingdom come, if he had wanted to.

He remembered the day he had confided his plan to the local bully, he couldn't recall why he had told him, maybe to impress him. Well he wasn't impressed, in fact he thought he was a nerd, whom he kept repeating as he beat him black and blue. He must have been a nerd to trust a bully.

When he got home that night he got another beating, his father wouldn't stop until he had given him the bully's name. And now that he thought about it, he remembered that he never saw that bully again.

Cluttered round the attic stood an assortment of junk. There was an old lamp stand, a rocking horse, John hadn't a clue as to where it had come from, he certainly couldn't remember it, and he couldn't for the life of him think why his aunt would have bought it.

Right at the back of the attic, shoved deep inside the shadows, he could make out a couple of beaten suit cases, and just to the left a pile of newspapers, and sticking out from beneath the newspapers a wooden plaque.

"There might be something in them," Mitch whispered.

"I reckon so," John agreed.

But then he noticed that Mitch didn't mean the suit cases, he was making his way over to the opposite corner. John could see stack of old biscuit tins of various sizes. He turned back to the wooden plaque and eased it out from beneath the yellowing dead papers. He turned it and read the name aloud, "Kukulkan."

Kukulkan, he didn't know why but the very sound of it sent shivers down his spine, but at the same time the feel of the nameplate felt good in his hand, and the image of it hanging proudly by the front door kept flashing through his mind.

He turned round and watched as Mitch opened the top tin and spilled its contents out onto the dust strewn floor, sending up little pillows of minute particles. John meanwhile opened the nearest case and peered inside. It was full with what at first glance he took to be old rags, but on further inspection he found was clothing, children's clothing.

He tried to recall any of it, but couldn't. He couldn't remember any of it being his.

He opened another case, and this too was filled with clothing. This time, he was certain that it hadn't belonged to him. It was full of colourful garments, girl's garments.

The two remaining cases held the same sort of things. Maybe his aunt had saved them for Oxfam or some other charity; they could even have been her old cloths from her youth.

But even as this thought entered John's head he knew it was bullshit. He picked up one of the yellow-paged newspapers and noticed that it was dated 1960. And the headlines stated that another child had gone missing in the Buckley area. There was a photo of an innocent, smiling girl of about eight years of age. At the foot of the page the story ended with a statement, the police hadn't any clues. John read the rest and them all told the same story, yet another child missing. Twelve in all. John was disturbed from his thoughts by Mitch calling him over.

"What you got?" He asked, sliding down beside him.

"I might have found something, this photo's got Roy in it, it's old, and there's three other people in it, maybe you can help with who they are," Mitch noticed the wooden object in John's hand, "what's that?"

John suddenly looked down at his hand, as if noticing the piece of wood for the first time, "oh, it's an old house nameplate."

He held it up for Mitch to inspect, "was that what this house was called?"

"I seem to remember it hanging by the front door," John noticed the look on Mitch's face, "why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing really, it's just a strange name to call a house."

"Well personally I haven't a clue what it means, but I kind of like it."

"Kukulcan was an ancient Mayan god; you know from Mexico, he was always represented by a snake, or serpents head."

Another chill crept down John's spine. He took the photo from Mitch and studied it. There were two couples in it. One was Roy and his aunt, there was no mistake there, and the other couple were his parents. His mothers smiling face and the bull like form of his father.

But unlike in his dreams, where he couldn't see his father's face, he could see it quite clearly now. And the smiling face set on the tree trunk neck of his father, was also the face that glared out from beneath the snakes head, the face that belonged to the monster in his nightmares!

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

"What's the matter, John you look like you've seen a ghost?" Mitch asked, a worried frown clouding his face.

"You might say that," John replied, shaking his head slowly, not once removing his gaze from his father's hard features. All of the dreams from his childhood were crashing through his mind. Only now both his parents had faces, and his memories of <that> face were all bad.

He must have blanked out his father's image. Was it because of the nightmare, did he really see it happen and pushed it deep down into the recesses of his mind, only for it to come back and haunt him in his dreams? A hand on his shoulder shook him from his trance,

"Hey, what's the matter?" Mitch asked again, clearly concerned.

"You were right, in a way; you could say I have seen a ghost. The woman next to Roy was my aunt, and the couple next to her are, were, my parents." Although he knew his mother was dead, John was having serious doubts about his father.

"I've got something to tell you," John began, "but you must promise to keep an open mind."

"Hey, I promise," Mitch shot back, but unsure if he would be able to keep the promise.

John told him the story. The whole story. At first he wasn't sure just how much he was going to tell Mitch, but once he had started there was no stopping, the floodgates had been opened, and he decided that if he was going to tell Mitch anything, then it might as well be the entire story, leaving nothing out.

And the entire story was told. From his childhood, the deaths of his parents, the trips with Roy, the nightmares that had plagued him as a child, and plagued him again as

soon as he had returned to the house. He told Mitch about Sindy employing him, about the death of Henry Woods after he had spoken to him, about running Sindy down, only to find her turned into a rat, about the incident in the bath tub, and finally about not remembering what his father had looked like until now, and that he now realised that the face of his father and the face of the monster from his dreams were one and the same. And he told Mitch that maybe, just maybe, his father could still be alive and that it was he and Roy who were behind the crimes.

It had taken over an hour for John to relay his story and Mitch hadn't interrupted once. John felt naked and exposed now that he had finally finished, and it seemed that Mitch still didn't have anything to say.

"Well say it, tell me that I'm a raving loony and it's time you were leaving."

"Hey hold on, I'm not going to say you're a raving loony," Mitch slowly stated, "but I do need a little while to think this over."

The anger that had quickly boiled up in John eased off. What had he expected? That Mitch would say - I believe you, now let's go and get those two sons of bitches. He realised that that was exactly what he had expected. But deep down he wasn't surprised that Mitch had reacted the way he did, if someone had told him the same story, and then he would have behaved in the same way.

No, if the truth were known, he would have acted different. He wouldn't have been so polite about it.

"Look, don't take this the wrong way, but I do have to be going, and you have given me a lot to think about, and I do promise I will view it with an open mind."

John looked hard at Mitch, and realised instantly that he was telling the truth. If Mitch was going to call him a nutcase, then at least he would know that he had thought long and hard before coming to that conclusion.

"Yea, maybe I'll see you later." John said, lamely.

"I've got a bit of work on my desk to clear, but you can count on it." Mitch pledged, rising from his chair.

When Mitch reached his office, he brushed the files that were scattered across his desk to one side, and laid down the one's he had collected from records on the way up. He found all he could on the missing children from the sixties, and on the recent cases. If there was any link, then he was going to find it. He had also discovered reports about the accident that had killed John's parents.

He had promised that he was going to view what John had told him with an open mind, and he intended to do just that. Although he had only known John for a couple of days, Mitch was certain that it had taken on hell of a nerve to tell him, and what he had told him was the truth.

Or at least what John believed it to be the truth. Which was pretty much the same thing in his eyes? And although John had thought that Mitch regarded him as a loony, he didn't. He had heard a lot of strange things in his years as a reporter, some really strange

things, where you would expect the person involved to be carted off to the nearest funny farm.

But when he had delved into their stories, he hadn't found anything to disprove them. These things, over the years, had turned him from a complete non believer of the unexplained, to, let's say, a semi believer.

He had certainly heard some wilder cases than this, so this story at least deserved looking in to, after all, it might make a great headline story.

He studied the case histories in the papers, then when he had finished, he studied them again. One thing that struck him was the fact that they all were young and all lived in a twenty mile radius of Buckley, which in its self were unusual. After all, Buckley was just a small Welsh town, not bloody L.A.

This type of crime was unusual for Britain full stop. So why was it that no one was sitting up and taking notice now? Even to him it was clear that something very odd was going on, and like thirty years ago, children were disappearing from the Buckley area again.

SO WHY WAS NO ONE TAKING ANY BLOODY NOTICE!

He rubbed his head with a sweaty hand and sighed inwardly. It was news, bloody big news, so why wasn't anyone covering it more deeply. Why hadn't he? Well if no one was going to cover it, then he sure as hell was going to.

Whether or not John was telling the truth, Mitch knew that he was the key, he didn't know how, but he did know that if he could turn him the right way, then the door would open and they could blow this case wide apart.

As he sat staring at the outline of his well chewed nails, he suddenly had an image spring to mind. An image that sent cold shock waves down the entire length of his spine. It was an image of his torn and mangled body being dragged through the field to the open grave that he had seen being dug earlier.

John had decided that a rest was in order as soon as Mitch left. The morning's events were beginning to take their toll.

Although he was tired, sleep didn't come easy. He had gone for shit or bust when he had told Mitch his story, and he had no way of knowing just how he had taken it. Maybe he should have got to know Mitch better first, after all, he had only just met him, and maybe he was only in it for the story. Well, if that was what he was after, then he had given him a story to get his teeth in to.

When John thought about it, he realised that he hadn't had any other choice but to tell Mitch, because he reckoned that there just wasn't that much time left to play - get to know ya-.

He didn't know how long he lay on top of the bed before he finally dropped off, and he didn't know how long he had managed to sleep, before a loud hammering on the door

brought him back into the present. But he was glad the knocking came when it did, his dream was starting to turn nasty. It wasn't -the dream-, it was a new one, with a new cast, and once more he felt lost and helpless. The knocking came just in time to stop him from seeing what happened to Mitch, whose limp body was being dragged through the wet grass up in the field.

He knew it was -the field-, because now he could smell it. He staggered down stairs, rubbing sleep from his eyes, nearly falling more than once.

As he opened the door, Mitch's smiling face was a welcome sight indeed. He hadn't really been sure if he would see him again.

"I'm sorry if I got you out of bed, can I come in?"

"I haven't been to bed, I just had a lie down," snapped John on the defensive.

"Hey, I don't blame you for being tired after all the shit you've been through," Mitch commented, throwing up his hands.

John wasn't sure if he was being sincere or just humouring him, "I'm sorry if I bit your head off, I guess I'm still tired." John stepped to one side to let his visitor in. "To be honest, I wasn't sure if I would see you again in a hurry," he went on, as he shut the door. "Why, because you're a raving loony? There was no danger of that, even if I didn't believe what you told me, I'd still have come back just for the story," Mitch laughed.

Although he had made light of it, John knew that he spoke the truth, which was something he didn't often hear from a reporter.

"So what are you saying that you believe me?"

"Well I'm not saying I believe you," Mitch began, then seeing the look on John's face, he hurried on, "but I'm not saying I don't believe you."

"Then just what the hell are you saying?" John demanded.

"I'm saying just that. That while I'm not a firm believer in it, I'm not a disbeliever either."

"Believer in -IT-" John smiled, raising an eyebrow.

"You know what I mean, the paranormal."

"So you think this is paranormal, do you?" John teased, riding him now.

"Well you sure as hell think something is going on and I don't know about you, but it doesn't sound bloody normal to me!" Mitch yelled, his face turning a dull purple.

John could see the anger in Mitch, but wasn't about to let up, "so now that we've established that it is something weird, what do you suggest, call in Spooky Moulder and tell him we've got another X file for him?" He spat the words out.

"Well not quite, but maybe the next best thing."

"The next best thing? And what the hell would be the next best thing?" John asked, getting interested despite himself.

"I'm not really on speaking terms with old, Spooky, but it just so happens I do know someone who might be able to help us." Mitch snapped back.

"Oh it's US, well is it us when they start dishing out the straight jackets?"

"Ok shithead, just listen, she's a professional psychic, I met her while doing some research into fake fortune tellers, and as I said, she might just be able to help."

John stared at him as if he was the bearer of news that the world was going to end in five minutes.

"I don't believe what I'm hearing," he shook his head in disbelief.

"It's quite simple, you tell her what you told me, and we'll take it from there."

"I'm beginning to regret telling you, I expected some kind of a reaction from you, but Christ, not this!"

John paced frantically round the room, stopping now and then to see if Mitch was still there and not just another one of his dreams, "no way!" he yelled, "no bloody way."

"Listen here, you fucking selfish bastard, try thinking of others instead of you!"

Mitch exploded.

John stopped his pacing as though he had just walked into a brick wall. He hadn't thought of anything except making a fool of himself, but now Mitch's harsh words etched into his brain, and made it start working again.

Who was he to say no, to not be willing to try anything to get to the bottom of this thing, and more importantly, to not put a stop to the disappearances of innocent children. He felt like kicking himself, how could he be so blind? He now knew beyond doubt, by the way Mitch's true feelings emerged in his outburst that he wasn't just in it for the story.

John gazed in to Mitch's furious face, and suddenly felt drained, "okay, I'm sorry," he offered feebly, "who is she?"

"Her names Matilda Joy, she lives just on the outskirts of Chester."

"Well that's - err-, well a pretty normalise name," John laughed, trying to ease the icy atmosphere.

"Actually, she does go by a different name, but I can't for the life of me remember what it is though," Mitch also broke into laughter, washing away any of the frost that was left between them.

"So when do you want to go and see her?"

"How about now?"

"How do you know she's going to be in?"

"Well, err, I phoned her before I came over." Mitch explained, and then cringed.

John shot him a look, but said nothing.

Within five minutes, which is how long it took John to make him presentable, at least he thought he looked presentable, they were on their way to Hoole.

Hoole was on the other side of Chester, but a lot easier to get into than Chester. It was straight up the by-pass, so in less than twenty minutes after they had left John's cottage, they were knocking on the door of a semi-detached house in the richer part of town.

"It's not really what I expected; I pictured some spooky little place in the middle of nowhere." John whispered out of the side of his mouth, as he listened to the footsteps drawing closer.

Mitch didn't have time to reply before the door was flung open with a theatrical gesture.

"Oh Mitch, it is good to see you again!" The woman exclaimed, throwing her arms about the startled reporter.

John couldn't take his eyes off her. She was the most bewitching person he had ever come across. She could easily be taken for a famous film actress.

John tried, but couldn't decide, if she was older or younger than him. Her smile and her eyes lit up like a Childs, but a mature presence was all around her. John opted for her being about the same age as him, well it was convenient.

She had the fairest skin he had ever seen, and wasn't wearing a stitch of makeup. No false eyelashes, no deep rouge on her cheeks, no big splodge of lipstick, nothing, and she still looked like a model.

"I'd like you to meet my friend John."

John staring, mesmerised into her deep hazel eyes, suddenly realised he was being spoken to, "oh, I'm sorry, pleased to meet you," he mumbled, shaking the outstretched hand.

The hand felt warm and comforting, and he held onto it a little longer than expected, reluctant to give it back, when he realised what he was doing he flushed a deep red. The woman gave them a broad smile and invited them in. The interior of the house was a lot different from the outside, and John felt as though he had just stepped through a portal. The whole of the hall was in a dark gloom, the colours made him feel as though the walls and ceiling were closing in on him. Although the outside was quite suburban, the inside was on the exotic side. The ornaments that were scattered along the shelves and hanging from the walls were all symbolic of witchcraft, voodoo, and other pagan beliefs.

John felt a shudder crawl down his back and had a sudden foreboding about being in the house, and no matter how hard he tried to fight it, this sense of foreboding just would not sit still.

She opened the door to the room where she said she performed her sittings. The first thing John noticed was the crystal ball sitting in the centre of a round table in the middle of the room. Except for six chairs, this was the only furniture in the room.

John suddenly felt stupid for the unease he had felt as he had entered the house, she was a crank after all.

"Look, Mrs Joy, I don't think this is really a good idea," John stammered, backing towards the door.

"There's no need to be nervous, and it's Miss Joy, although I would rather you called me Mattie, there's no need for us to be formal, is there?" The soft words stopped John's retreat, "after all, we seem to be from the same era," her radiant smile enchanted John. Had she read his mind? Well crank or no crank he thought, it would be worth going through with this mumbo jumbo she proposed just to spend a bit more time with her.

The two of them sat at the table opposite each other, Mitch was ordered to stand in the corner and say nothing, she spoke to him in a tone as though he were a naughty schoolboy, and Mitch complied, but was clearly sulking.

To John's relief, she said she didn't need the crystal ball and moved it to one side. The curtains were closed and the room was in semi darkness, but John could see quite clearly.

She stretched her arms across the table and told him to join hands.

"Now just close your eyes and relax," she advised.

John did this willingly, feeling the warmth flowing from her hands. He started to become light-headed, opened his eyes and stared at the woman opposite. She was murmuring under her breath and had her head tilted right back. John thought, if this is love, then I will take it any day. Suddenly he felt her hands jerk, felt his flesh rip when her long fingernails broke the skin as her hold tightened.

The murmuring had become loud and agitated. John turned to Mitch for help, but Mitch just shrugged. He turned back, to find the hazel eyes boring into him, only they weren't hazel, and the face wasn't that of Mattie.

He was staring at the face of the child in his dreams. She seemed to be trying to say something, but John heard nothing. He tried to pull his hands free, but couldn't escape the vice like grip.

As he stared at the girls face, it changed, he now saw Sindy, but as fast as she appeared she was gone, and now he looked at the unwelcome features of the dead rat. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn he heard it laugh.

Then the rat was gone.

He was now staring into the face of the prostitute whom he had hired to set up his last case, it was his last case, and he was fired! Then the face of the girl he knew as Sandra, the girl from his dreams was back, and this time he heard a small, weak voice beg for help.

Then suddenly Mattie was back, and she looked terrified, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

John wanted to reach out and brush them aside, but he still couldn't move his hands.

She suddenly screamed a blood chilling shriek, and her head bounced back, and then forwards again, as though it was on a spring.

And now he was staring into the black hell hole eyes of his father.

The big face cracked open and a foul stench filled the room.

"Come and stop me boy!" The dead voice rattled.

John let out a hollow sound and ripped his hands free. And Mattie was back, she gave vent to a low rasping groan, then her head fell sharply forward hitting the table top with a sickening thud.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

Mattie's head felt like lead, she tried to raise it from the table, but failed. She could hear concerned voices and tried again. This time she succeeded, but wasn't sure whether she could hold it up for long. The pain was screaming through her skull, and it felt as though it was coming from somewhere deep within side her. Her head had hit the table hard, but she had suffered worse blows without so much pain.

"I'm fine." She lied.

"Are you sure? You've had a nasty knock."

Mattie noticed the strange way that John was looking at her, and wondered if it was just the blow on the head he was worried about or something else.

"It's a little sore, but I'll live." She assured him.

"What m-made you act that way, w-what did you see?" Mitch stammered, his words falling over each other in their rush to be free.

"I, I don't know, I can't remember a thing," she answered slowly, watching John's face for any clues as to whether he knew anything.

John remained stony faced.

"And what was that you said- come and stop me boy?" Mitch urged.

"Yes I can remember saying that, but I don't know why." Mattie mumbled, more to herself than to the two worried onlookers.

"I know why." John said, in a toneless whisper.

Both faces turned towards him expectantly.

"It was him, it was my father."

"Your dead father?" Mitch queried.

"Yes, I'm sure now that he really is dead, and for some reason he wants me." He sank back down in his seat heavily. "So I guess you won't be able to help me," John spat out in an, I told you so, manner.

Mattie stared at him for a moment, and then offered a weak smile, "I wouldn't give up just yet."

"You're not going to look in your crystal ball now are you?"

"Well I know you're the number one fan of the occult, and you have every faith in me, but no."

"I'm sorry, I know I'm being sarcastic, but I guess I was hoping for a bit too much." he apologised.

"No, that's okay," Mattie gestured with one hand, "I'm used to this reaction. People are willing to believe, so long as they hear what they want to hear."

She was right, and John suddenly felt rather guilty, he would have embraced the whole situation, so long as it gave him a whole lot of answers and left everything nice and tidy, case closed. But things never work out that easy, and it was stupid of him to expect any different.

"So what do you mean by not giving up yet?" He asked, in a pleasanter fashion.

"Well this has happened a couple of times before, it's not common, but it has been the case that after I come out of my trance I can't remember a thing, on both of the other occasions however, I have remembered later."

John felt hope surge through him, up till now he was the only one who had seen the changes in Mattie, they had all heard the voice, but it was only he who had witnessed the eerie images that had occurred.

"So when do you think you will remember?" He urged.

"It's hard to say," Mattie seemed to shrink into her seat, "the first time it took a couple of days to come to me, but on the last occasion it was over six weeks."

John felt his heart sink like a stone. So this time it could take even longer, if she remembered anything at all.

The darkness of night had taken hold while they had been inside the house. It was a clear sky, and the far off stars winked at John as he almost stumbled through the front door. Steady now, they mocked.

Although there had been no heating on in the room, he had still managed to break out into a sweat. But it was a cold sweat, a sensation that had every nerve in his body tingling. The cold breeze lapped round his ears, so he released the elastic band that held his hair in a pony tail and shook his head, sending locks of hair flying in all directions. Whether or not it did any good was a matter for speculation, but he felt better none the less.

Ice had already formed on the car, and it took a bit of fumbling and cursing before Mitch was able to get the key into the lock and open the door. John quickly leapt inside and watched as Mitch went to work on the windows with a small yellow plastic scraper. December the first tomorrow, John mused, maybe we'll have a white Christmas this year. Yea, and maybe I'll be visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, that's if I have got any bloody future.

Floods of self pity washed over him completely, and although he realised that he was sinking into self despair, he didn't know why.

He glanced out of the window at the ordinary looking semi, and tried to make sense of what had taken place.

"You ready to go home?" Mitch chirped, jumping in behind the wheel, "or would you prefer a nightcap somewhere?"

"Just get me bloody home!" John snapped.

"Okay, okay." Mitch mumbled something else, but John didn't catch it over the noise of the engine firing up.

John bit down hard on his lip and a warm coppery taste filled his mouth. Why had he snapped at Mitch, what the hell had he done, apart from not starting the bloody car before his little ice scrapping.

"Look I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bite your head off, it's just that I really do feel tired, and I don't think a beer is the best thing for me now."

"No sweat, it is late and we will need an early start in the morning."

John was puzzled, "why, what's happening in the morning?"

"Well, if you're not doing anything better, I thought we might follow Roy and see what his typical day is."

"But I might have a job, or-----" John let his sentence trail off, he had no illusions that any job had come in, even if there had, he wouldn't be able to take it on and give it one hundred percent, not while this nightmare still hung above his head.

"Okay," he submitted, "but haven't you got anything that you need to do?"

"I'll just call the boss and tell him I'm working on something secret and I'll let him know what later."

"Will he buy it?"

"Nope." Mitch grinned.

John had a restless night. Although he didn't suffer any nightmares as such, he still had images floating in and out of his head all night. By five o'clock he had had enough, it seemed as though every time he closed his eyes another face appeared to torment him. Finally he gave up, and threw on his discarded clothes and went downstairs to await Mitch's arrival.

Virtualventures

He didn't have long to wait, no sooner had he reached the front room than there was a heavy knocking on the door.

"Bloody hell," muttered John, "when he said early, he bloody meant early!"

"Sorry to wake you at this hour--" Mitch began, then eyed John up and down, "or not wake you up, but I thought we should start as soon as possible."

John could see that there was something on his mind, and by the look of him, he too hadn't had much sleep, but he decided against asking him any questions.

"So when do you want to set off, now?"

"Well seeing as we are both up, it's as good a time as any." Mitch was trying to sound cheerful, but failing.

"Okay then, but I doubt if Roy's up at this hour."

"That's even better, we can catch him as he leaves, and he want have a clue he's being followed." Mitch smirked, "so we'll take my car and you can tell me where he lives on the way."

A silence filled the room, and Mitch eyed John warily. "You do know where he lives?"

John looked down at his feet uneasily, "well, err, no, I supposed you did," he said weakly. He hadn't given it another thought, it had only just struck him now, but even as a lad he could not recall ever going to Roy's house, and he sure had a lot more on his

mind since returning than wondering where Roy lived. But he felt stupid just the same, and the way that Mitch was looking at him didn't improve matters.

"Okay, so what now?"

"Well I don't know about you," Mitch said, sidling past into the front room and slumping down in the nearest chair, "but I could murder a brew."

John sighed and went obediently into the kitchen, "but what if he isn't working today?" he shouted over his shoulder, splashing water everywhere but into the kettle.

"There's only one way of finding out." The answer came, accompanied by the sound of the phone being dialled.

"Hello, could you tell me if Roy Jones is on duty please?"

John couldn't hear the reply, but from the conversation that followed he gathered that he would be on duty at half past seven, which gave them plenty of time to kill. And maybe they could come up with a better plan of attack than to just follow Roy.

But after a lot of ideas thrown around the room, they realised that following him was about the only scheme they could dream up at the moment.

By seven, they were waiting in the car behind the council offices opposite the police parking area,

"So what car has he got?" Mitch didn't wait for an answer; the sheepish look that spread across John's face said it all.

"Well don't blame me!" John protested, "He's only ever come round in his bloody cop vehicle."

"Okay, okay, no panic, just watch out for every motor that comes in."

They didn't have long to wait, the third car to roll into the parking lot was Roy's... They nearly missed him getting out, they were both engrossed by the gleaming Triumph Herald soft top that looked as though it had just rolled off the production line, and he was nearly through the back door of the station when John caught sight of him.

Mitch nodded as John pointed, neither of them spoke, it was as though they expected the slightest sound to alert Roy to their presence.

A half hour passed slowly before Roy came out of the rear door and half wobbled, half strutted over to a patrol vehicle, wedged himself behind the wheel and slowly pulled out, looking in just about every direction.

John and Mitch as one slid down into their seats, if they hadn't known better, they would have sworn that Roy had been looking for them. But he had no way of knowing he was being followed, had he?

John felt the familiar tingle of excitement crawl down his back, it was the feeling he always got when following someone, and to him it was more like a game than a job. Will they catch me out, or won't they?

Mitch fired the engine up and moved off, giving Roy enough time to turn onto the main road before following. There were four cars between them and him.

"Don't get too far back," John whispered, "we don't want to lose him."

"I have done this before you know." snapped Mitch, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

I bet you have, John thought, following some poor bloke to get as much dirt on him as you can. "Not much different from you, ah Jonnie boy," a voice chirped in his head.

"You needn't whisper," Mitch added, "he can't hear us you know."

"I bloody know that, it's just that I usually work alone," huffed John, anger rising in his voice.

Mitch gave him a sideward's glance and smiled, let him stew, he decided. John caught the smile and was about to let fly, when he realised what he must sound like. A broad grin flashed across his face, and then the grin turned to laughter.

Mitch tried not to copy, but the laugh was infectious, and very soon the whole car was filled with the sound of their mirth.

They followed Roy from one end of town to the other, from one village to another, down dirt tracks, country lanes, and even to the local Asda, where he spent a good hour doing his shopping.

But he didn't do anything out of the ordinary, not that is, from what they could see. They were both getting a bit irritable, and were starting to snap at each other again.

"What do you suggest, give up?" John hissed.

"No, but we could do a little research somewhere else and come back later and wait at the station for him to pick up his car."

Although the idea was good, and it appealed to John, if they did what Mitch was suggesting, they would just be defeating the object.

"Do what research?"

"I don't know, go to the library and see if we can dig anything else up." But Mitch didn't have much idea of what he meant.

"And supposing he does something while we are gone?"

Mitch knew that this was possible, and admitted defeat. When he had said he had followed people before, he wasn't lying, but what he hadn't confessed was that he had hated every minute, he was not known for his patience.

For the next two hours they hardly spoke a word to each other, and Roy still didn't do anything out of the ordinary. A flood of relief swept through both of them when they realised that Roy was heading back to the station.

After half an hour, Roy emerged from the rear door and made his way over to his car. Just as he was about to get in, a figure came out from the shadows of one of the garages.

From their vantage point opposite, John and Mitch watched as the two men shook hands. Although the figure was small in stature they could tell that it was a man. And from the way they shook hands; John guessed that they had only just met. After all, Roy didn't strike John as a man who shook hands with every friend at every encounter, unless of course it was an old acquaintance that had just turned up out of the blue, but the way he seemed to be hiding in the shadows dismissed this idea.

"What do you think is going on there then?" Mitch asked, more to himself than his passenger.

"Beats me."

After a couple of minutes, the man stepped back into the shadows, and Roy climbed into his car and started the engine. As he reversed and swung the car round, the headlights illuminated the figure in the shadows. It was only a brief moment, but long enough for John to see the man's face. A face he knew.

"What the fuck!" He exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

"That man, I know him."

"Yea, so," Mitch couldn't understand what was bugging John.

"It's only bloody Jason Mallory!"

The name meant nothing to Mitch.

"My boss's son, my ex boss, the little shit who sacked me."

Now Mitch could see why John was upset, but still couldn't grasp what the big deal was.

"My ex boss," urged John, "what the hell is he doing here? He probably hasn't even heard of Buckley, and what the hell is he doing talking to Roy?"

"It is a mystery," Mitch agreed, "but one we will have to figure out later, let's go."

Mitch eased out after Roy, not so far behind him this time. It was now dark and they were less likely to be spotted. At least that's what they hoped.

John, still reeling from the shock of seeing wimpy Jason, didn't really notice where they were going. It was the bumpy road that brought him back to the present. He realised that they were no longer on the main road, but on an old dirt track.

Mitch had dropped right back, he could just see the tail lights now and then, before they disappeared round the next bend. As they rounded yet another bend, Mitch nearly went right up Roy's arse end.

He had stopped and was opening an old farm gate to a side lane. John slumped down in his seat as they drove past. As soon as they were out of sight, Mitch pulled over.

"So what now?"

"We'll leave the car and follow on foot." Mitch decided.

"He might live miles down that lane!" John argued.

"But then again, he might not, and a car driving down his path would be a dead give away."

As it turned out, Mitch was right. After a slight curve in the lane an old farm house loomed into view.

John tapped Mitch on the shoulder and pointed to an old barn that could just be glimpsed sticking out from behind the house.

"Let's take a look in there," he suggested.

The place looked derelict, but secure. Just as they reached the east side a shrill scream ripped through the night.

"You take that side, I'll go this way," hissed Mitch, taking off at a trot.

As Mitch turned the corner he ran straight into a brick wall, and was knocked flat on his back. Shaking his head, he looked up to see the brick wall, but it was really a brick fist. And the fist's owner was an angry looking Roy!!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

John rounded the corner just in time to see Roy place a well aimed kick at Mitch's prone figure.

"Stop!!" Yelled John, not breaking his stride, "there's no need to bloody kick him!"

Roy's foot stopped in mid flight, and he jerked his head round to stare at John as he approached. What John saw in Roy's eyes stopped him in his tracks. They seemed to be a blazing blood red colour, and there was no sign of any recognition in them. Saliva was dripping from the snarling mouth, and his breath, in the cold night air, gave him the look of a flame breathing beast rather than a human being.

"Take it easy Roy!" John yelled, holding his hands out in front of him, to ward off any danger, "just take it easy."

Mitch scrambled away, and slowly eased himself to his feet, with the help of the barn wall.

Roy cast a hunted glance from side to side, from John to Mitch, as if he was a cornered animal deciding which one of them to attack first. As John braced himself for the encounter, an ice cold sensation rippled through his body and slammed into his skull. The pain that followed quickly passed, and the cold feeling vanished. As he watched, the red lights in Roy's eyes flickered and went out.

"John?" He gasped, as though seeing him for the first time, "what the hell are you doing here?"

We--," John began, but Roy wasn't listening, he was staring at the cowering form of Mitch, who was still pressed firmly against the barn wall.

"Hey look, I'm sorry," Roy offered his hand to shake, "I didn't recognize you in this light."

"No problem," muttered Mitch, ignoring the out stretched hand. The moon was full, the sky was clear, and he sure as hell had no difficulty recognizing Roy.

"Just what the hell are you doing here anyway?" Roy asked again, Mitch's reluctance to shake his hand not going unnoticed.

John answered his question, "We came to see you, to find out if you have got any leads on the missing children."

Roy eyed him suspiciously. John knew that it was a feeble reason to be there, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

"Why didn't you come to see me in works time?" Roy prodded.

"We did," John lied, "but you were out patrolling somewhere."

"How did you find out where I live?"

"We asked at the station." Roy stared hard at him, and he flinched under the intense scrutiny.

After a long silence, Roy released John from his gaze, and shook his head. Whether or not he believed the excuse, he wasn't saying.

"I've got no further on this case than I told you last time," Roy sighed heavily, a sigh that reminded John of a second rate actor over doing his part, "and it still goes that you don't print anything until I say," he spat vehemently at Mitch.

Mitch recoiled under the harsh words, "I won't print a word until you give permission."

"Good," snarled Roy, not taking his eyes off him for a moment, "I would ask you in, but I'm busy, you know the way out." He had dismissed them as though they were nothing more than a couple of low lives from the gutter, and had started walking back towards the house when John's words brought him to a halt.

"We heard a Childs scream." John could see the muscles in the huge neck pulsate, and the wide shoulders flinched, as though he had been struck by a flying blade.

"The barns old, a lot of timbers missing," he said, without turning, his words caring easily in the still night, "The wind makes some strange noises when it blows through them."

John watched as the big man propelled himself towards the house at a speed that would have made a younger man green with envy.

"Let's get the hell out of here," commanded Mitch, disengaging himself from his wooded support.

John could tell by the slight tremor in his voice that Mitch had no desire to push matters any further, so he turned and trotted after the quickly departing figure. Once they were back at the car, Mitch seemed to ease off slightly.

"Now that is one mad man," he gasped, breathlessly.

"I know, did you see his eyes?"

"See them! They were the only things that kept my mind off the kicking he was giving me!"

At last, thought John, he wasn't seeing things, this time Mitch had seen them too, so it wasn't a trick of the light. He heaved a sigh of relief, he no longer felt so much alone, and Mitch was becoming aware of the strange things that were happening too.

"So what about the scream we heard?"

"Well it could be as he said," Mitch offered, weakly.

"Come off it!" John snapped, "There hasn't been a fucking wind all night!"

Mitch could see the anger rising in John and knew that he was right.

"Okay, say it was a scream, what are we going to do?"

"We are going to have to go back."

"Hold on a minute," alarm grew in Mitch's voice, "can't we just go and report it."

"Oh yea, that would look real good," John spat sarcastically, "well officer, we were prowling around an old barn and we heard a scream, when we confronted the owner, a police officer, he said it was just the wind!"

"Okay, okay, you've made your point, so we go back." Mitch submitted, turning to retrace his steps.

"Hold on there buddy," John said, grabbing hold of his arm to hold him back, "I know that if it was a scream then the kid is in danger, but we are going to have to find another way in, we don't want to run into Roy again do we?"

"Do you really think he has got some one up there?"

"I'm sure of it, deep down I know that was a scream we heard, and I'll bet my life that we're going to hear about another missing child."

Mitch suddenly felt guilty over his reluctance to act. "Well let's find another way in; we've got no time to lose."

It had taken those over twenty minutes to circle round the field and come up at the rear of the barn. A few clouds had appeared in the sky, blocking out the moon's light and offering them shadows to hide in.

"Someone's watching over us," John whispered.

"Well let's hope he calls a warning if Roy comes this time," Mitch mumbled, rubbing his bruised ribs.

They were concealed behind a thorn hedge, and as they looked there didn't seem to be anyway of getting into Roy's land without having to climb over it, and although it was winter, its branch's still held some nasty weapons. They edged their way along the hedge until they came upon a low section that wasn't as dense as the rest of it.

"This is as good a place as any," John whispered, turning to Mitch, but Mitch wasn't there, he had taken ten paces back and was now running towards the hedge.

John watched in awe, as the reporter vaulted easily over the hedge and landed on his feet, as though he was competing in the highland games.

John took ten paces back, and then thinking better of it, took another five. He stampeded towards the hedge and threw his body as high into the air as he could. But even as he took off he knew that he had jumped too soon.

His foot was grabbed by what felt like a hundred talons, and he fell head first onto the ground. Although it was grass on the other side, the cold winter night had turned the ground into concrete, and as he hit it, his nose exploded and white bolts of lightning flashed through his skull.

Mitch scrambled over and worked on the spikes that held Johns foot. The pain in his nose easily outweighed the pain of the thorns that had ripped into his ankle, and the blood was now flowing freely.

John cursed himself for putting on training shoes instead of his trusty cowboy boots that he usually wore.

"Are you okay?" Mitch asked, staring down at the sorry looking features of his friend.

"I'll live," replied John wiping blood from his face with his sleeve, "let's go."

The frost covered grass snapped under every step, sounding like fire crackers exploding in the still night. John tried to put as little weight as possible on each foot as he

trotted towards the barn. There was just as much noise, but it did bring a smile to Mitch's face.

On reaching the barn, they threw themselves against the wall, trying hard to blend in with the rough wooden panels. Edging their way along, they soon came upon the tall doors. And around the doors hung a thick heavy chain, with the biggest padlock John had ever seen.

"What about a window?" Whispered Mitch.

John looked up the tall walls. Nothing. He couldn't remember seeing any in the other walls either.

"There aren't any. It looks as though this is the only way in."

Mitch fell down to his knees and started to prise a section of the door away, sending a loud creaking noise echoing through the air.

"Shhh," John hissed, cringing.

There was another loud crack, and then a piece of the rotten panelling came away from the steel frame.

"I could probably manage to get my leg through it at a push."

"Okay, I'm working on it, just one more board and we can get in!" Mitch snapped.

"Yeah, and if you carry on making all that noise, then Roy will be working on us."

Another loud snapping sound reverberated through the night, as Mitch fell backwards clutching his prize of another section of rotten door.

John pushed himself through the opening and waited while his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Rays of moonlight filtered through the holes in the roof, illuminating the ground with hundreds of small spotlights.

It was in one of these small spotlights that John could see a crude wooden bench on the far side of the barn. As he got closer, he could make out rusty chains bolted to a steel beam, and on the end of the chains were manacles. Small manacles, too small to fit an adult wrist. Bile filled his mouth, and he spat it out with disgust.

"So it is him!!" Mitch snarled, edging behind John and his gruesome discovery.

"Look," gasped John lifting one of the manacles, "blood! So we did hear a scream."

"Let's get into that house and beat it out of him!" Mitch hissed, running for the door."

"Hold on, we still haven't got any real evidence." John yelled, racing after him, "and we did break in."

Mitch didn't let up speed as he ran to the house and lunged at the back door. The wood splintered as the door was dragged from the frame, and both the door and Mitch went sprawling across the tiled kitchen floor.

"Well done Rambo," mocked John, stepping over the sprawling Mitch.

He wrinkled his nose as the smell of damp and decay greeted him. It smelt just the same as Kukulcan did the first time he entered that, but his house had an excuse, it hadn't been lived in for a while.

Mitch staggered to his feet clutching his shoulder, "next time you can be Rambo."

"Well I guess he isn't in."

"What makes you so sure." asked Mitch.

"I'm sure because you made enough noise to raise count Dracula from his beauty sleep." snapped John, raising his voice to prove his point.

"He might be a heavy sleeper, and besides count Dracula doesn't sleep at night, he only sleeps in---"

John was about to snap back, when he saw the slight curve on Mitch's lips, "your sense of humour is a bit thin at times."

"Yeah, it has been said. Lets look around, he might have brought the kid in here," but although he said it, Mitch didn't believe it.

After a quick look round the house, they hadn't found anything. Well they had discovered one thing, and that was Roy lived like a pig. The smell of mould was in every room, and the wet wallpaper hung in tatters from practically every wall. There was almost no furniture in the house, and his bed was just an old mattress tossed in one corner of a room.

"How can he live like this, yet his car looks gleaming and new, even if it is over thirty years old?" gasped Mitch.

"Beats me," John said, shaking his head, "it's as though he just doesn't care about how he lives, and he sure as hell isn't into the luxuries of life."

"He can only be twenty minutes a head of us at most, but without knowing where he is going, it might as well be twenty days." sighed Mitch, defeated.

"I might know where he's heading," John shot back, making for the door.

Mitch was hot on his heels. He was glad to get out of the pig style. "So where?" he shouted after the quickly vanishing figure. This time they weren't hiding in the shadows, they were running straight up the main drive.

"The field!!"

The words came floating back to Mitch and hit him like a hammer. Of course, the field. So much had happened at the field that it seemed the only place he would be going. At least they hoped it was, and that they arrived in time, for his victim's sake.

John jumped in behind the wheel of the car. Mitch didn't object, he just handed over the keys and climbed in beside him. The drive to the field could have beaten the land speed record, and Mitch was relieved when they turned onto the lane, forcing John to slow down.

As they approached the gate, they were suddenly blinded by cars headlights that were glaring on full beam. John pulled as far over to the side as he could, advert his eyes, but still seeing wallow flashes.

Mitch swung round in his seat and caught sight of the distinctive shape of the Triumph Heralds rear lights.

"It was Roy," he yelled, "should we follow him?"

"No," John said, quickly making his mind up, "he came up to the field for a purpose."

He glided the car up to the gate, almost leaving no room to open the door, and was out of the vehicle and over the gate in one swift movement.

As he flew over the gate, his entire body was raked by a sensation similar to having a thousand volts shot through him. He hit the other side on his face, setting off another

flow of blood from his bruised nose. He shook his head to clear his eyes of the fog, but soon realised that the mist was swirling all around the field, and he could see dark shapes dancing about like he had the last time. But this time nothing came to greet him. There was thud to his left, and Mitch was kneeling beside him. He had no problem landing on his feet, thought John.

"Can you see anything," Mitch enquired, pointing into the mist.

"What, you mean those dancing shapes?" John said, hoping that they were what Mitch meant.

"What dancing shapes?" asked Mitch puzzled, "I mean over there, by the trees."

Trees, what bloody trees? All John could see was the bloody mist. A mist that it seemed only he could see.

"Let's get over there," he suggested, slapping Mitch on the back, "you lead the way."

Mitch set off at a run without looking back, and it took all of John's energy to keep up. If he let him get too far ahead he would lose him in the fog.

Suddenly Mitch stopped dead, and John went flying into him, almost sending them both sprawling.

"What's the matter," John hissed.

"There's the kid, but something feels wrong."

John strained his eyes and could just make out the form of a child sitting on the ground, and from what he could make out; he seemed to be tied to a post. He or she?

They moved slowly towards the immobile form, and when it seemed as though nothing was going to happen, Mitch sprinted the rest of the way.

Testing the boy's pulse, he sighed with relief, "he's still alive!"

John sank to his knees and helped to untie the ropes that were binding the child.

"We're going to have to get him to hospital quick." The mist and figures seemed to be getting thicker and John felt as though he was drowning, "hurry Mitch," he urged.

"You don't think that he's coming back?" Mitch breathed, "And why the hell did he leave him out here in the open?"

His question was answered by a loud, angry beast like scream from within the trees.

John jumped to his feet, but Mitch didn't seem to have heard it.

"Come on! We've got to get out of here!" yelled John.

Mitch was startled by his sudden reaction, "what the hell's the matter?"

"Just believe me, if we don't move quick then we are going to be in deep shit."

Mitch realised that John was in deadly earnest, and quickly scooped up the limp body and set off at a run towards the gate.

John looked behind in time to see a huge figure covered in tatters of animal skins burst from the trees. The noise it was making would have frozen the fires of hell, and John could feel his strength ebbing away. It was as though the creature had an invisible line connected to his back, and for every step he took, the beast was pulling him back one. He could hear Mitch's voice floating through the mist. "John. Why have you stopped?"

"Just get the kid out of here!" John screamed, cursing Mitch for not being able to see the danger that he was in. But there was one thing, if Mitch couldn't see it, then maybe it couldn't hurt him. But he didn't want to take any chances. "Just get the hell out of here!" he yelled again.

Mitch didn't need any more telling, and set off at a run once more muttering "just what the hells got into him."

John could almost feel the snorting beast's breath on his neck, when the hold suddenly let go and he propelled forwards, as though he had just taken the full force of a bomb explosion.

He almost fell to his knees, but was able to just about keep himself upright by running along on all fours.

He could hear the heavy footsteps behind, but wasn't taking any chances; he knew that if he stole a glance back, then it would be the end for him. A sudden spurt of energy washed through him, it was almost sexual, as he felt his tired body take on a new lease of life. He felt fitter than he ever had, and his strides doubled, and the mist seemed to part out of his way, giving him a clear view of the gate a couple of hundred yards ahead.

He was pounding towards the gate like an Olympic athlete. He felt more confident than he ever had since returning, and took the risk of looking back.

A big mistake!

The beast was right behind him; he stretched out his claw like hand and gripped John's shoulder, sending pain down his entire side.

Breaking loose of the hold, John pushed forwards, but lost his footing and crashed into the old wooden gate.

He managed to climb a couple of the gate beams when a hand shot round his neck. A voice close to his ear sent a pain through his head, "come to daddy, boy, then we're complete!" it rattled.

He felt his grip on the gate weaken and was about to fall back into the field when something pulled him forwards. The sudden change in movement sent his head against the gate, which it struck with a sickening thud.

And the voice that had invaded his head suddenly disappeared, and instead of having a pain from the blow against the gate, the pain left his head also, and he was left with a feeling of utter relaxation, and he no longer cared about falling back into the field, he just felt as though he could float.

And he floated off into darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

"Hey, hold on there!" Mitch yelled, pulling John over the gate by his collar, "there isn't anyone after you, you're okay."

John no longer felt as if he was floating, now he felt to be flying, and over the gate he flew. As soon as he was on the other side, his head started throbbing.

"What hit me?" He asked, passing a hand lightly over his bruised head.

"Nothing hit you," Mitch replied puzzled, "you head butted that bloody gate as though it wasn't there!"

John smiled weakly.

"What the hell got into you anyway, there was no one out there, there was no one following us."

"I swear that I will tell you everything," John promised, "but not just now."

"Okay," sighed Mitch, "at the moment we've got better things to do, like getting this poor kid to a hospital."

"No! No hospital." John objected.

"Look he needs help, right now!"

"I know, I know, but it might not be safe to take him to a hospital, it could be a trap, Roy might be dogging our every move."

After moments pause, Mitch agreed, "What do you suggest?"

"Mattie." John said meekly.

"Hold on there," Mitch tried to find his words, "you've only just met her, and I don't really know her much better, so what the hell makes you think she would agree, and there's the danger we would be putting her in."

John had thought of the danger, and although he didn't like it, it was one of the few options they had. If she said no, and refused to help, he would understand. But he knew, he felt certain that that would not be her response. Although he had only just met her, he felt that he knew her, really knew her, as if there was an unspoken bond between them.

Or was it wishful thinking. She had certainly stirred something in him, and he decided that when all this shit was over, he would try to get to know her better.

He was suddenly aware of Mitch glaring at him.

"Well what makes you so sure that she will help?" He asked again.

John just shrugged lamely, and offered a weak smile, indicating that the debate was over.

Mattie opened the door, and was shocked to see her visitors. It wasn't the hour, after all it was only just gone eight. She regarded the lifeless bundle of rags that Mitch was holding, as though it was an offering.

"A bunch of flowers or a box of chocolates would have done," she thought, but then she realised that the bundle of rags was a child, and concern took over. "What happened?" She queried, pulling back a corner of the dirty blanket in which the child was wrapped. Not waiting for an answer, she ushered them in, and ordered Mitch to take the child upstairs and put him in her bed. Turning to John she observed, "at a guess, this has something to do with you."

John turned crimson, and was lost for words.

She smiled at his unease, "okay tell me about it."

As Mitch came back down the stairs, John wondered how much he should tell her.

Everything?

He saw the look on Mitch's face when he got to the part about his 'client', and the job she had hired him to do, and about the strange dreams. John just smiled at him apologetically and hoped he would not feel too bad at not having been told the whole story.

When he had finished, he studied Mattie's face for any reaction. He could read nothing in her expression.

"You've had a hell of a lot of bad memories bottled up inside you," she finally remarked, "It's no wonder that you keep getting these nightmares."

"But the nightmares have only started since I came back," John pointed out.

"The house, the field, finding the old name plate, they are all things that help to trigger off these dreams, to start your imagination off."

"Well that bloody child upstairs isn't any imagination!" He yelled, "and the fact that as soon as I visited old, Woods he ends up dead isn't my imagination and- and -"

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to say that you have dreamt all this up, it's just that I think you are open to suggestions."

"Meaning what?"

"Well like I said on your last visit, certain things come back to me."

John sat bolt upright, eager to hear what was coming next. "So you have got an idea why all this is happening?" He urged.

"It would be a lie if I said I knew what was happening, but I do have an idea."

"Anything's better than nothing,"

"Did you have a sister who died?"

John was puzzled by the question, "no, why do you ask?"

"What about a female relation who died?"

"Well of course, my mother, my aunt."

"No, no, I mean a young relation, say seven or eight?"

John felt his guts tighten, "no! Now what the hell is this all about?" He demanded.

"If you are sure, then I guess I'm wrong," Mattie conceded, "but I keep getting this impression that someone close to you, who has departed, is behind all your nightmares."

John's heart sank. So if he was going to get any answers, they weren't going to come from Mattie. But he guessed that he had always known that.

"I know you have got your problems," Mitch interrupted, "but we have got a dilemma upstairs at the moment."

As though to prove his point, a moaning sound came echoing down the stairs. Mattie was the first to rush upstairs, Mitch and John lagging behind, neither of them wanted to be the first to reach the child, as neither of them was quite sure just what to do or say.

Although Mattie had no children, she knew just how to act round them. She murmured soothingly, and gently rocked the boy until the moaning became a whimper, and then the whimper died away to a mere sniff, "what's your name?" she coaxed, but the child just clung to her and stared in horror at the two men in the room.

"I think you're scaring him, it would be best if you waited downstairs, I might be able to get him to talk," she suggested.

"Okay," they both said in unison, glad to let her deal with it, and jamming the doorway in their attempt to leave the room at the same time. Mattie smiled and shook her head; it was as though she had three children in the house, not just one.

Half an hour later, they heard Mattie coming down the stairs again. Neither of them had spoken in that half hour, now they were firing questions at her, left, right and centre,

"Hold on, hold on," she said, flinging up her hands, "one at a time."

"Did you find out anything?" John asked.

"No, not really, all I could get out of him was, -the monster man-, but as for who he is or where he comes from, I drew a blank."

"So he saw him too." John whispered.

"Saw who?" Asked Mitch.

"The monster man. My father. Kukulkan, the asshole who chased us in the field, only you never saw him."

Mitch shrugged his shoulders, "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," John assured him, "it's just that now I know that I'm not the only one who sees him, these poor kids see him as well."

"Hold on a minute," Mattie butted in, "when he said monster man, he might have meant Roy."

John thought about it for a brief moment, then dismissed it, "no, I'm sure he meant my father, and if he saw him, its no wonder the kid is in such a bad state."

"So what are we going to do now?" Enquired Mitch.

"Well if its okay with Mattie, we will leave him here tonight, and tomorrow try and find out if there's been any young boys reported missing." He smiled when Mattie nodded in agreement.

As John pulled up to his house, he saw the Triumph Herald tucked in the slight lay by, by the gate. Turning off the engine, he sat for a moment studying the car. There was no sign of movement.

Climbing out of his own vehicle, he slowly edged over to the Herald, looking all around as he closed the gap. Peering through the window, he could see the car was empty. He was just trying the door, when a harsh voice froze his fingers.

"I was wondering where you got to!"

John swung round and saw Roy's grizzly frame lumbering towards him.

"Oh, err, hi." John stammered, "I was just wondering whose car this is."

"Oh yeah, you've never seen my car before, have you?" Roy sneered.

"You've only been round in the police car," laid John, adding, "It's in good condition."

"It's my pride and joy," Roy smiled, and then remembering what he was there for, his voice turned harsh once more, "but I thought you might have seen it when you were up at my house earlier."

"No, it was dark, I didn't see much." No sooner had he said it, than John felt like kicking himself, it was bloody dark now and he saw it alright.

"Well I just called round to apologise for before, but you did turn up at my house unannounced."

By the tone in his voice, John could tell that he wasn't sorry in the least.

As soon as he entered the house, he could tell that someone had been in there; in fact that Roy had been in there.

It wasn't any little thing that led him to that conclusion, no book slightly moved, no little mark in the dust, no, he realised that someone had been in there because the place was like a bomb site!

The television had been smashed, his new hi-fi had been slung across the room, and there was even a c.d embedded in the door jamb. The whole place had been totally blitzed.

"The bastard!" Snarled John. He knew that Roy had done it, and he knew that Roy knew that he knew he had done it! Was it a warning? Or was it Roy's way of saying, "look what I've done, and there's nothing you can do about it."

And John knew that he was right. There would be no bloody point in reporting it; after all, he would only end up with Roy investigating the case.

It took nearly an hour to make the place look halfway liveable in again, and at the end John was done in, so he wearily dragged himself of to bed.

The nightmares came again that night with a vengeance. John was lying in bed awake, or so he thought. He realised that he couldn't be awake when the bed opened up and swallowed him! He didn't feel he was falling so much as being dragged down.

But down he went. It was like going down in slow motion. He watched as first the covers went by, then the mattress, springs and all, then the space beneath the bed.

"I'll have to clean all that dust up, what a messy person I am," he thought.

Then the floorboards flashed by, and he fell through the ceiling into the room below. As he plummeted down, the speed picked up, and he felt as if he really was crashing into the concrete below.

His body felt like it had been kicked by a dozen mules as he was dragged through the floor and into the earth beneath. He could taste the mud as it filled his mouth, and just when he thought he was going to pass out, he fell through the earth and landed in a large cave.

The cave was lit by torches on either side, lighting up strange drawings on the slimy walls.

Gingerly, John climbed to his feet, and for the first time realised how vulnerable he was, standing in the damp cave in just his boxer shorts.

Suddenly he saw a light appear in the corner, and then it grew brighter. He noticed that there was an opening, and hearing footsteps, reckoned that it wouldn't be long before he met his host.

The smell came first, filling every little notch in the cave. And then came death. Not death itself, but death in the form of his father. And just by looking at him, John no longer had any doubts whatsoever that he was indeed, dead.

"Well hi there son, so nice of you to drop in," Death rattled, "I'd offer you something, but I don't seem to have anything in at the moment."

John stared at the pitiful sight in front of him. He no longer wore his snake skull and furs, and the bones on his arms and legs were his, and they were sticking rudely out of his rotting flesh. John half expected the creature to buckle at any moment. But the creature didn't buckle.

"Oh forgive my appearance," it gibbered, "but I don't seem to work out as much as I used to."

The whole cave was filled with an inhuman cackle. John tried to speak, but couldn't.

"What's the matter son? Cat got your tongue." Suddenly in the monster's hand a cat appeared a black cat.

John couldn't be sure if it was his cat, but it sure as hell looked like it. As he watched in horror, death thrust his hand down the cat's throat and pulled out its tongue. A scream that sounded like a little girl's echoed round the stinking cave.

"Why don't you have this one?" Death mocked, throwing the cat's tongue at John.

He tried to duck, but the wet piece of flesh hit him right in the mouth, filling it with a salty taste.

"Now we can talk," his father said, closing the gap between them in two easy strides.

John fell back, but the monster was on him, breathing foul fumes at him. Dragging him off the floor, he was thrust face to face with the decaying features of his -dad-.

"Now son, I think it's about time you joined me down here."

It was too much for John's stomach, and he felt the bile rising in his throat, and gush out into the putrid face of his father.

The beast screamed, and flung him to the other side of the cave in one swift movement.

"I was going to make it easy for you," the ghoul spat at him, "but I've changed my mind."

John heard a loud knocking and a familiar voice calling his name.

"Don't worry; no one can save you now."

But John didn't believe it; he focused all his attention on the voice, and closed his eyes, shutting out the grotesque image in front of him.

Suddenly it was as though he was on the end of a bungee rope. He felt a jerk, and was lifted off his feet, lifted the way he had come, leaving the wailing of the depraved creature below.

He saw the room, the ceiling, the floor and the mattress go by, and then he felt the hole in the bed close beneath him. He lay there for a moment, and then in a panic in case it opened up again, he threw himself out, and as far away from the bed as possible. But the bed just looked like any other bed.

The knocking and shouting down below was louder now, so flinging on his dressing gown, John stumbled down stairs.

"Okay, don't smash the door down, I'm coming!"

"Hell, I thought something had happened to you," Mitch wheezed, out of breath from all the shouting.

"Well let's just say I wasn't altogether here." John commented.

Mitch looked puzzled, "when you never called, and I couldn't get any answer, well, I thought something had happened to you."

John smiled at his friend's obvious concern, "you can make a brew while I get ready," John said, looking at his watch, "I guess I am running a little late."

As he turned, something fell from his dressing gown. Mitch stooped to pick it up, "what's this?" He asked, holding a small pink object.

John looked hard at the small piece of flesh, "that my friend, is what is meant by the saying, loose talk, or tongues, cost lives,"

Mitch stared at the article in his hand a moment, and then, realising what the pink rubbery thing was, dropped it as though it was on fire.

"What the hell's going on?"

"I'll tell you on the way over to Mattie's," John promised.

Half an hour later, they arrived at Mattie's and learnt that there was no further response from the boy, he was still saying nothing.

John quickly described the events that had happened to him in his nightmare.

"You sure as hell pissed him off," Mattie finally said, "it seems as though he really wanted the boy and you got in the way of his plans."

"I guess so. It looks as though Roy gets the kids and delivers them to my father, but what I can't understand is why?"

"If we knew why, we would be half way to beating them."

John liked the sound of 'we', but although they could help him with Roy, it looked as though his father was his problem with which he had to deal, and they wouldn't be much helps to him against whatever lay a head.

"We better start trying to find out who this little boy belongs to and put them out of their misery," Mitch butted in.

"Yea, you're right," John agreed. Turning to Mattie he said, "We'll talk about this later."

"I'm not going any where," she smiled.

When they arrived at John's office they found it in the same state his house had been in the night before.

"Jesus!" Exclaimed Mitch, "it sure looks as if Roy got pissed off when we saved that kid!"

"I guess it's pointless to try the answering machine," John said, picking up the broken instrument.

"It might be best to go to my house and I'll ring round from there and see what we can come up with," Mitch suggested, still staring at the room in disbelief.

"Yeah, looks as though my welcome has run out here."

"So now that Roy thinks we saved the kid, what do you imagine he's going to do?" Mitch asked, after they had been driving a short while.

"Well for one thing, Roy doesn't think, he knows, and for what he's going to do now, your guess is as good as mine." **Virtualventures**

"You know, I've been thinking," Mitch mused, as though it had just come to him, "what if Roy killed Henry Woods because he was scared that he would tell you something."

The same thought had crossed John's mind a thousand times. "It's almost certain that he killed him," he hissed.

"Well what I was thinking was, if he killed him, then what is there to stop him killing us?"

Before he could answer, he spotted someone walking along the pavement. "Stop the car!"

Before the car had a chance to stop, John was out and had the surprised Jason Mallory by the throat, and up against the wall.

"What are you doing here?" He yelled, "and what did you want with Roy Jones?"

"Take it easy, I only came to collect my money," the sniffing boss's son yelped.

"Collect what money?"

"The money he paid me for sacking you," Jason blurted out.

John felt as though someone was about to jump out and tell him it was all a joke, candid camera. Roy had paid to have him sacked. Why?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

John looked hard at the man who was half way responsible for him coming back to Buckley. He felt like hitting him right between the eyes, but he knew that Jason was just a pawn in the game.

"Get the hell out of my sight before I decide to rip your head off!" John snarled, in a fake Hollywood accent.

The x-boss didn't notice the mockery in the voice, to him it was real, and the man in front of him would indeed rip his head off. He didn't fancy the idea, so he took off down the street as if the Devil himself was after him.

"What was all that about?" Mitch asked as John climbed back into the car.

"I know why he was in Buckley;" John said reflectively, "Roy had paid him to sack me."

"Sack you," echoed Mitch, "but why?"

"Why indeed, when I didn't take up the house straight away he must have got worried."

"I don't understand," Mitch frowned, puzzled, "why on earth does he want you back in Buckley?"

"That my friend is something we are going to find out," John promised.

"Yeah," Mitch said, starting the engine, "but first we've got to deal with the boy."

Virtualventures

When they arrived at Mitch's house, John was impressed. He hadn't realised how much money there was to be made as a freelance reporter.

"This is some place!" he whistled.

"I like it, but I don't know how long I'll be staying here," Mitch sighed

John then noticed the for sale sign, and the tone in Mitch's voice and queried, "Then why sell it?"

"Oh, if I had my way I wouldn't, but my wife, my ex wife, has other ideas."

John realised for the first time just how little he knew about his new friend. He had told his problems but had never asked about Mitch's personal life. He suddenly felt embarrassed that he had acted as if as far as he was concerned, Mitch was a reporter and that was all he needed to know.

"I'm sorry, I didn't even know you were married," he muttered

"I am still married, I'm the one divorcing her, and she took the kids and went off with a younger man."

"Then what claims can she have on the house?" John asked in surprise.

"She's entitled to half, the laws on her side, even though I worked every hour god sent for years so that we could afford the place, and regardless of--," he spluttered, "regardless of the fact that she has never had to work, I can't afford to buy her out, which means I have to sell."

Noticing the bitterness on Mitch's face, John let the matter go.

After about an hour of ringing round, Mitch found that within a fifty mile radius, three children had gone missing.

"What do you reckon?" He asked John.

"Start with the closest, get a description and we'll see where we go from there." John advised.

Mitch rang the first name on the list, and told the woman on the other end of the line that he would put a piece in the paper and do all he could to help. He wasn't lying, the trembling voice on the other end was all he needed to make him realise that not enough was done to help these families, that they were just left alone to cope on their own with their losses.

"That's a blank," he said, "their boy's blonde."

Ringling the next name on the list however, brought a description that seemed to fit the lad that they had.

Placing a hand over the mouthpiece, Mitch enquired, "What should I tell them?"

"Nothing," John replied, "Just arrange a meeting."

He listened as Mitch told the person on the line that he would like to interview them, and that he would call on them at home in an hour and a half's time.

"Let's hope it is their boy," John sighed, "at least then there would be one happy ending."

"What about this last name on the list, should I ring them?"

John thought for a moment, "No, we will leave it for now and see how this turns out," he decided finally.

Virtualventures

When they collected the child, John could see the obvious relief on Mattie's face, he knew that they had asked a lot of her, even put her in danger, but she hadn't uttered a word of complaint.

When Mitch asked her to look after the boy she had readily agreed, thought John, she knew the risk she was taking but still agreed. And although she knew Mitch, he himself had only just met her, mocked her even, yet she was still willing to help. Looking at her, John could almost see the warmth radiating from her.

"I'm sorry we put you in this tricky situation," he said, sheepishly, and leaning forward, kissed her gently. Realising what he had done he cringed and waited for the outcome somewhat apprehensively, but she just smiled.

"I would do it again if it helps these poor children and if it helped you--" she let the sentence trail.

"Okay you two, enough of this heart to heart; we've got a meeting to go to." Mitch butted in, light-heartedly.

John blushed a deep red and followed Mitch and the zombie like child to the car, but on reaching it the boy pulled his hand free, ran back up the path and lunged at Mattie. He held her tight, as though he was trying to stop her from floating into the clouds.

"Come on mate." Mitch urged.

"I don't think he wants to come with us," grinned John, "I told you not to wear cheap aftershave."

"I'll get my coat," Mattie said, leading the clinging boy inside.

When they pulled up outside the Denton's home, they could see the curtain moving and a pallid face peering out.

Mattie, shielding the child from view, was watching him covertly for any sign of recognition of the street or area. His face remained blank.

"Okay Mattie," John said, leaning over the seat, "you wait here until we are certain that this is their boy or not."

Before they had reached the door it was flung open, and a white faced woman, her eyes bloodshot with weeping, welcomed them as though they were her saviours.

"Have you any news? Anything, anything!" She pleaded.

"We're not sure, can we come in?"

She stepped aside to let them pass, "can I get you a drink?" she asked, absently.

John could see that her mind was miles away and declined. When they entered the front room they stopped in their tracks. It looked like a shrine. There were toys littered everywhere, and all over the floor were pictures of a babies smiling face, and of the same face in different stages of growth.

The woman didn't apologise for the mess. It seemed to them, that she was to upset to see that there was a mess.

They tried to skirt round the toys and pictures, but she just waded through them as though they weren't there.

"Where's your husband?" Mitch asked.

"I'm not married," she whispered, "I only have Dean." the tears started rolling down her hollow cheeks.

"May I have a look at these photos?" John enquired, gently scooping up a handful.

She seemed to notice them for the first time, "how did they get there," she mumbled, distantly.

John stared at one of the photos, and then turned it towards Mitch. The smiling face gazing back was the same as the sad one in the car.

John watched as Mitch got up and left the room. The woman didn't seem to notice, she was staring at her hands, watching numbly as the tears rolled from her cheeks and splashed down on her fingers.

Mitch re-entered the room with the boy who was still clinging on to Mattie.

The woman had her back to the door, but as soon as they entered she shot upright and spun around.

"Dean, Dean!" She screamed.

The words echoed round the room and the zombie boy suddenly came to life. He let go of Mattie and ran over to his mother.

"Mummy, mummy," the boy sobbed, and held on to her as he had with Mattie.

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you," the woman moaned, and the three rescuers felt tears not so far away.

"We found him walking the streets," Mitch began, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

John placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, "not now," he whispered, and nodded towards the door.

They slipped out of the room unnoticed, relieved to escape into the cold fresh wind outside.

"If only all these torments could end like that," Mattie sniffed.

"So long as there are people like Roy around, they never will." John growled.

"So what are we going to do about Roy?" Mitch asked, "We have got to stop him before he strikes again."

"Maybe he won't strike again," Mattie observed, not really believing her own words.

"She could be right," Mitch remarked, "he might know that we are on to him and be too scared to do it again."

John shook his head, "no, he will have another go, I don't know how I know it, but I do."

"So what are we going to do?" Mitch repeated.

"We are going to make sure that the bastard knows that we are on to him," John declared after a moment's reflection.

"But if he did take us seriously, then what is to stop him killing us on the spot?" Mitch argued.

"We just tell him that if anything happens to us, then there is a letter with an editor just waiting to be published."

"Do you think that he will buy it, or even care?"

John just shrugged, and both Mattie and Mitch felt an icy chill, and shivered involuntarily.

They went back to Mattie's to decide on a course of action, and how to deal with Roy.

But the main reason was to drop Mattie off. On the journey back, she had insisted on being there when they confronted Roy.

"But Mattie," John argued, "if anything was to happen to us, you are the only one who knows the truth."

"Besides, he doesn't know you exist," added Mitch.

"Okay, okay, you're right," she conceded, "but be careful."

As Roy reached his front door and half turned the key, they pounced. They hit him with so much force that the door flew open and the three of them tumbled inside, landing in an untidy heap on the floor.

Roy thrashed about, trying to strike his attackers, but both his hands were pinned to the ground.

"Now just stay still you bastard, or I'll do you so much damage that you will wish you was dead!!" Mitch hissed in a low, menacing voice.

Roy tried to move but was pushed deeper into the floor. As his vision cleared he spied one of his assailants, "John," he gasped, "what the hell is going on?"

"You may well ask, you asshole, but we know what you have been up to."

Roy let out a hollow laugh, "oh you do, do you boy?" The laugh sounded demonic and un-nerving, so John drove his knee into the lawman's ribs to cut it short.

Roy growled, "Now that's not nice, is it?"

"And it's not nice what you have been doing to these poor kids, you evil bastard!"

Mitch spat out.

"Ah, Mr Reporter, I hope you haven't printed anything yet," sneered Roy.

"Not yet, but I will, just before you get what you deserve."

"Oh I'll get what I deserve, but it won't be by your hands."

"Well Roy," growled John, "we have spoilt your little game, the boys still alive."

Another laugh filled the hallway, "Yeah, I know that, but you see, I had another one as back up."

His words struck the two men like a rock. As soon as they had found out those three children had gone missing why hadn't they suspected this?

"You son of a bitch," yelled John, ramming another knee into the big mans ribs, "why are you doing it?"

"You wouldn't understand," snarled Roy, through clenched teeth.

"Try me. I know that you are delivering them to my father."

"Oh your father is it, you sad boy, you know nothing!" His tone was scornful.

Suddenly, John understood what was in Roy's words. "We've got to get up to the field, now!" he gasped.

"Oh you better run boy, there is no time to waste," grinned Roy.

"What about him?" Mitch queried.

"We will have to make sure that this sack of shit doesn't go anywhere,"

"Oh John, such cruel words," the cop gave a mocking laugh.

They dragged Roy over to the banister, and secured him to the stairs with his own handcuffs. A quick inspection of his pockets produced the key. John kicked him between the legs for good measure, and the big man let out a piercing scream. John quickly put the key into the open mouth, and held Roy's nose, pulling his head back, he tickled his throat like he had seen on a vet programme once. Roy choked a couple of times and then swallowed hard. John pulled his mouth open and smiled when he saw that the key had gone.

"You had better pray that we are in time," he yelled at the bloated man dangling from the stairs.

Mitch zoomed along like a racing driver, and they soon arrived at the field. Taking a deep breath, John lunged over the gate. As he hit the ground on the other side, he braced himself for the sick and dizzy feeling.

But the sick and dizzy sensation didn't come. He felt nothing but the racing of his heart. There was a thud and Mitch landed by his side.

"What's the matter buddy?" he asked.

"Nothing, I was just a bit winded," John lied.

"Where do we look?" Mitch queried.

"How about the same spot as last time?"

They set off at a rapid pace until they reached the area, and both slowed down as one.

There was nothing there. They had been stupid to expect that there would be.

"Nothing," Mitch gasped, "so where do we look now?"

"I don't know, I have as much idea as you."

Then something caught John's eye, "over there," he pointed.

Mitch followed the direction of his arm, but saw nothing. "What am I supposed to be looking at?" He demanded.

"The ground has been disturbed."

Then Mitch spotted it, about twenty yards from where they had discovered Dean Denton, there was a patch of freshly dug earth.

He felt his heart sink as he realised that they were too late.

John was down on his knees, digging furiously at the frozen ground.

"Let's call the police," Mitch urged.

"No, we have got to make sure, maybe it's a trick and that's what Roy wants us to do, how would we look then?"

But it was no trick. A small white hand soon came into view, and in the hand was a little green plastic dagger.

The boy must have been playing when he was snatched, and had clung on to the knife as if for protection. But it gave no protection.

As John uncovered more, and the face was exposed, Mitch swallowed hard as the truth hit him, "it's the first house I rang," he groaned, "the blond haired boy."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure. Yet I am."

John nodded his understanding. Just then a piece of paper came away with the next clod of earth. John unfolded it and swore loudly.

"What is it?" Mitch asked, snatching at the scrap of paper. The words were in red ink and read, hard luck son, I'll be seeing you soon, have a nice day. The message was signed, from your loving father.

Mitch screwed it into a tight ball and threw it as hard as he could, but the cold night air didn't let it travel far.

He gasped as the paper rolled back towards them, although there was no wind, not even a breeze to make it do so. As they stared, it slowly unscrambled itself.

"What the hell?"

John leaned forwards and picked up the paper, folded it, and dropped it into his pocket as though nothing strange had just happened.

"So what are we going to do about this poor kid?" Mitch whispered, after shaking his head in bewilderment.

"There is nothing we can do," John answered, and taking the knife from the boy's lifeless hand, stuck it into his waistband and started to walk back towards the gate.

"So you mean we are going to just leave him there?" sputtered Mitch in disbelief.

"That is just what I mean."

"But hell-" Mitch began.

"Look!" John yelled, rounding on him, "I don't like it any more than you, but there is nothing we can do for him now, and telling the police or his parents would only complicate matters."

Mitch knew that it made sense, "But I still don't like it, it just ain't right," he mumbled stubbornly.

"More important, we have got some questions that need some answers," John replied in a grim tone.

Mitch gritted his teeth, he wouldn't mind giving that son of a bitch a few kicks into the bargain, and he told himself.

By the time they reached the house a few clouds had appeared and small flakes of snow drifted to the ground and melted slowly, but for everyone that melted, two stuck firmly.

Virtualventures

The door was slightly ajar, and John made a John Wayne type entrance, kicking it almost off its hinges.

He was about to yell abuse at the lawman when two things riveted his attention.

One was the broken banister. The second, and more important one, was the huge figure at the end of the hall steadily pointing a double barrelled shotgun at his head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

John felt Mitch glide into him, and on seeing the sweating lawman with an unsteady finger on the trigger of the gun, he heard the reporter gasp a long drawn out, "sh-----i---t.!"

"Yes, shit indeed, buddy" Roy snarled, "and that's just what you have walked into."

"Take it easy Roy," John whispered, softly. He could see that the man was well over the edge. In fact, the way his eyes stared blankly, it looked as though he had gone right over and was on his way down, "maybe we can help."

Roy laughed loudly, a laugh that was full of despair, "help? Help who? The children, me? No, it's too late for either of us."

"We know you have been killing the children, but what I can not understand is why, what the hell they could do to you, you sick bastard--" the grip on Mitch's arm sent a pain through him that cut him short.

"Shut it Mitch," John hissed.

"Johns right Mitchy boy, in fact I think I will kill you now." Roy spat out the words, and levelled the gun at the cringing reporters head.

"Don't shoot him," John pleaded, "why add any more killings to your list."

"I don't think that sparing this creeps life is going to make my soul any more welcome in heaven, do you?" Roy grinned.

The seconds stretched an eternity, but the shot never came.

Roy dropped the gun barrel slightly so that it now pointed in between the two men. Ready to shoot the first one that dared to move.

John realised that the best thing he could do was to keep him talking. "Why did you get me the sack Roy?" He asked, softly.

"Ah, so you know," the lawman laughed, "you really have been doing some detective work. Quite simple, I needed you back in Buckley."

"Buy why?" John queried, still puzzled.

"Don't you know? Your daddy needs you boy."

John had had that feeling all along, now he knew it. "You see him?" It was more of a statement than a question. **Virtualventures**

"Oh I see him alright." The lawman spat, his face turning an angry purple.

John could tell the man was going into a steadily deepening gloom, "is it for him!" He shouted, "Are you killing the children for him?"

Roy's face took on a hurt expression, "oh John boy, you don't think I've been killing those kids?"

For a moment, John thought Roy really was hurt by the idea, but then he remembered the poor soul they had found that evening and his voice hardened, "yes I bloody well do think you have been killing them, and I think you and my dad killed them thirty years ago!!" He nearly choked on the word, dad.

Anger swelled up in the copper and John thought that his head was going to explode; he had pushed him too far.

"Listen son, your dads killing them now, and he killed them thirty years ago."

"I'm not your son," John rasped, "and maybe you are telling the truth about him killing those years ago, but there is no way that he is killing them now, he's dead!"

He didn't know what it was he had said, but the anger drained out of Roy.

"You have seen him," he sighed, "you have felt him."

John felt a chill crawl down his spine, maybe it hadn't been a dream.

"And what about Sindy Rawlings, I suppose she was one of my fathers little messengers too."

The lawman's eyes widened, "don't you mean Sandra?"

"No I mean Sindy, her sister."

"But Sandra had no sister, and believe me, I should know." Roy said, and something in his voice convinced John that he was telling the truth. Which left the question of just who was Sindy, and did she ever exist.

"What did the girl look like?" Roy asked.

"She looked like an older version of Sandra."

"I wonder, could it be?" Roy mumbled to himself.

"Could it be what?" John demanded,

"No, I stopped your father all those years ago," Roy went on, completely ignoring John's question.

"How did you stop him?"

"I fixed his car and killed him," Roy winked.

"And you killed my mother too," snarled John, taking a step forward.

"I'll kill you boy," Roy warned, and John stepped back.

"Yes, I killed Jenny too, I have wanted to die for that every day since, but I just aint got the guts to do anything about it."

John could see the sadness in his face and could have sworn that a tear glistened in the lawman's puffy eyes.

"So why did you kill her, if she meant so much to you?"

"I didn't know that she would be with him that night. I saw how pissed he was and knew that Jenny was in for a hiding again, and after he hit her he always went for a drive to find some poor kid to kill, so I fixed the car."

"But for some reason my mother was with him and you killed her too," John finished for him.

"Yes, and I've lived to regret it ever since."

"But if you stopped him then, why are you getting kids for him to kill, and why is he doing it now, after all this time?"

"I think you know why I'm doing it. I can't stop him from getting to me, just like you could not stop him from getting to you. As for the reason, why it's simple, he needs them," Roy sighed.

"Needs them, needs them for what?" John pressed him, truly puzzled.

"He needs their innocence to bring him back to this world."

John felt the breath being knocked from his lungs by the impact of the words. Could he do it, could he make his way back to this world? John now knew why he was back in Buckley.

"So you brought me back to stop him."

Roy shifted uneasily, "well not really, he wanted you back."

"But why!" John screamed, impatience goading him.

"Well firstly he wanted the kids," Roy drolled, as though he was talking to someone slow on the uptake, "and you might be pleased to know that he now has all he needs."

"Oh, I'm over the moon," growled John.

"And secondly," Roy carried on, ignoring the venom in John's voice, "he needs me dead. And lastly, he needs your blood to complete the journey."

"So you are going to kill me, and then grovel for your life," John sneered.

"No, not at all. I can't kill you; your fathers got to do that." Roy smiled.

For the first time, hope began to flicker in John.

"And you can't kill yourself, so what you are saying is that we can stop him."

"I'm not saying that at all, you might be able to stop him, but I will be dead, and you will have killed me."

Although John felt like he could gladly do just that at this moment, he knew that there was no way he was going to kill Roy.

"Well then, that's it, it's over, because I'm not going to kill you," he asserted.

Roy laughed out loud, "You may think you are not going to kill me, but you will."

John was getting really angry now, "come on Roy, let me take you in, and we will be able to get you help."

"You just don't get it boy, do you!!" Roy screamed, "Nobody can help me, I'm going to rot in hell, and you are going to put me there."

Roy took a step back and swung the gun around, placing the end of the barrel into his mouth.

"He's going to do it, he's going to blow his bloody brains out!" Yelled Mitch.

John raced forward to prevent him, and there was a deafening shot which echoed in the narrow hallway stopping him in his tracks.

John stared at the remains of the lawman, and then at the dark patches climbing all over the walls. The naked light bulb wasn't bright and managed to hide most of the mess, but not all.

John could see that the top of Roy's head had completely gone and there was a jet of blood hitting the ceiling and cascading down onto the limp bulk below.

Although limp, the figure was still standing, and as they watched, it seemed to pass the gun to one side, let out a soft moan, and then slide to the floor.

John felt Mitch's hand on his shoulder, "well he was wrong, wasn't he?"

"About what?" John replied, unable to drag his eyes off the dead cop.

"About you killing him, he was wrong."

"No, he was right."

"Look mate," Mitch said, comfortingly, "you only tried to stop him, he killed himself."

"No I killed him," John insisted pointing to the floor.

Mitch followed his finger, and then saw it. Running across the hall there was a thin wire, which ran through a hoop, and then went to another hoop beside Roy, and then it connected to the trigger of the gun. So when John had rushed forward, he had tripped the wire which set the trigger off on the gun, releasing the deadly shot.

That was why it looked as though Roy was placing the gun to one side, when he fell the gun was swung towards the banister on the wire.

So Roy had been right after all. John had killed him.

They had got out of Roy's place without touching a thing, and neither of them had gone near the body. Although Mitch had suggested it, John had put up a good argument to the chances that Roy could still be alive, the main point to his argument being that half his bloody head was missing!

As the drove in silence, John's mind was racing ten to the dozen. He was trying to make sense of what Roy had told him. And of what Roy hadn't told him. So he now knew that there would be no more children going missing, one small blessing of the whole affair. And, although Roy had not said as much, he had killed Henry Woods.

But what could Woods have told him that was so important that it got him killed all these years later. All John could guess was that Woods knew it was Roy abducting the children, and he was scared that John would put a stop to it before the right time. And then there was the news that he was going to be killed by his father, his dead father. He felt like laughing at the very idea, but he knew that it was no laughing matter, and deep down he also knew that he wasn't going to be able to do anything to stop his death. He did have one option. He could take his own life and thus rob his father of his chance to return. But although he knew it was an option that was about all it was. When it came to suicide, he just didn't have the bottle for it. He glanced at Mitch, and shook his head, that wasn't an option either.

Mitch noticed John looking at him from the corner of his eye. He knew his friend was worried, and a good reason he had too.

"Look John," he said, reassuringly, "we can't take Roy's words seriously; it was just the ramblings of a mad man."

Who's this we, John thought, your life isn't in danger. But he knew he wasn't being fair, he had no reason to be bitter towards Mitch.

"Ramblings of a mad man or not, he still went to a great deal of bother to make me kill him." John stated.

"Ah but," Mitch said, wagging a finger, "how could he be sure that I wouldn't be the one to rush forward and trip the trigger?"

"Because my friend," John grinned, "he knew as well as I did, that you would be quite content to stand there and watch him blow his head off."

Mitch just shrugged and gave a short laugh.

"Where are we heading anyhow?" John asked.

"Actually," Mitch muttered, "I really don't know, I so wanted to get away from that place that I didn't think of a destination."

"Maybe we should check on Mattie." John suggested.

"Do I detect a spark between you two?" Mitch winked.

John's face was solemn, and for a moment Mitch expected an ear bashing, but after a short while the clouds disappeared from John's eyes. "It's not that I wouldn't like there to

be something between us," he whispered, more to himself than to Mitch, "but with all that's going on, how could there be?"

He looked at his friend, his eyes hopeful that he would come up with an argument against the reason why there couldn't be anything between them, but his hopes were dashed.

"I guess you are right," Mitch agreed, "but when it's all over there is nothing stopping it."

"Nothing but the fact that I will be dead!" Snapped John.

Mitch looked at the deflated man beside him and felt a pang of sorrow. There was no comfort he could offer. Although he would not say as much, deep down he thought there was little hope, after all, how the hell do you fight a dead man?

Out of the blue there was a police car behind them, siren wailing and its lights flashing. Shaking Mitch pulled over to the side of the road.

John felt the cheeks of his backside twitching as he clenched them tighter, trying to get a hold of his nerves.

At the last moment the police car swerved and went hurtling past. Mitch slumped forward and hit the steering wheel with his head.

"Shit," he gasped, "did that put the shits up me!"

The rumbling from his stomach was the only response he got from John.

"Look," John said, "I think that we are worrying over nothing. I mean Roy's house is off the beaten track, so I don't think anyone would have heard the shot. He won't be missed until tomorrow, if he's missed then, and, tomorrows a long time off."

Mitch knew what he meant. It was going to be a long night, what was left of it, at least for John. He was also right about no one hearing the shot. It had been loud in the hallway, but outside it would only have sounded like a car back firing.

When they reached Mattie's they were in two minds on whether to knock. The place was in complete darkness. Suddenly the curtain fluttered, and a moment later Mattie appeared. The street was deserted, but they still raced to the door so as not to be noticed. John gave a final glance round to make sure, then dived inside after Mitch.

As soon as they were through the door Mattie turned on them, "I was so worried," she stammered, "I thought you were dead>"

John could see by her red rimmed eyes that she had been crying.

"Lets go and sit down and you can tell us what on earth gave you that idea," he said, soothingly.

"I nodded off," she exclaimed after a moment, "and saw a gun, I don't know who had the gun, but I saw that it was pointing at Mitch."

Mitch was about to say something, but Mattie continued, "I saw you running, and heard an explosion, then--" she looked at Mitch, tears once more rising in her eyes, "I saw you fall, there was so much blood-," she let the sentence trail off.

John glanced over at Mitch, and then back at Mattie. "Well your version was almost right, but Mitch didn't fall." He told her what had happened since they had left the house earlier.

"So the gun and everything you saw was right, except for the part where you saw Mitch fall." he concluded.

"No, you don't understand," she protested, "I saw you both running, running away from the gun, and Mitch didn't just fall, he was shot. It was his blood I saw!"

A silence fell across the room while her words sank in. If she hadn't seen the events of that evening, then what had she seen?

John stared hard at her, but in the dim light it was difficult to tell what she was thinking.

Suddenly the room was no longer dim; it was completely awash in a bright yellow light. And a harsh voice broke the silence.

"The house is surrounded by armed police, come out with your hands up!"

They just sat there unable to comprehend what was happening. Then the harsh voice came again, "John Lowe, come out with your hands up!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Mitch gasped. John looked at their faces in the strange yellow glow, and despite the situation he felt a deep calm inside.

"I don't know how, but my guess would be that they have found Roy."

"But they couldn't have," stammered Mitch, "We've only just left him."

"Well whatever, I've got to go out there."

"Maybe we can bluff it," Mitch said, "I'll go out there and tell them they have got the wrong place."

John smiled; he could tell by Mitch's face that even he thought it was a crappy idea.

"No, whatever it is, I will have to face it."

"Then I'm coming with you." Mitch declared.

"No!!" John saw the startled look on his friend's face and added in a softer tone, "what if what Mattie saw was a cop's gun, which's to say what will happen out there."

"So long as we don't run, it won't come true." Mitch replied stubbornly.

John shook his head ruefully, "no"

"Come out now or we will come in." the harsh voice called again.

John opened the door and was instantly blinded by the powerful light. He heard someone telling him to get his hands above his head, but couldn't see where the voice came from.

"Take five steps forward, and then lie face down on the ground and place your hands behind your back!" the voice screamed, still using the loudspeaker.

With a voice like that you don't need a loudspeaker, John thought, trying to visualize what the arsehole looked like.

Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his spine as a knee jolted it and his arms were pulled so far back that he heard them snap. A pair of cuffs was slapped on, cutting off the blood to his fingers. He let out a whimper.

"Oh this is just the beginning," another harsh voice snarled as he was dragged to his feet.

"Take it easy!" John heard Mitch shout, "Just what the hell is he being charged with?"

"Just who the hell are you? And stay just where you are."

"I'm a reporter, and I want to know what's going on here," Mitch pulled out his I.D.

"That don't mean shit, if you want to know anything ring D.C.I Lange." the man spat over his shoulder as he threw John into the back of a waiting police van.

"I demand to know!" Mitch yelled.

"Piss off."

"I'm going to report you, what's your name?"

"D.C.I. Lange!"

John struggled into a sitting position as the van sped away from the scene. "What's going on, why I have been arrested?" he asked the dark figure sitting opposite him.

"I think you know." the man replied.

John realised this wasn't the harsh voice he had heard before, although the same voice it now sounded almost pleasant.

"But I don't know," he sighed. But deep down he knew beyond doubt that this all had to do with Roy's death.

"Lets put it another way," the man said, leaning forward, revealing a hard, granite like face, "if you are guilty, a whole lot of parents are going to want to get their hands on you."

As his words sunk in, John felt a sudden panic. It couldn't be, did they think he was responsible for the children that have gone missing? No! He saved one, returned him home safe and sound. Could that be it, could the mother have reported he and they wanted to ask him a few questions.

As much as he would like that to be the case, he knew enough about police work to realise that they did not send round a bleeding army if they only wanted to ask a few questions!

No, they thought he was responsible, and they must have something to prove it to be able to muster up an army to come and arrest him. He shifted uneasily in the dark and felt something prod his leg.

They hadn't searched him that good when they threw him in the back of the van, and he suddenly remembered the little green sword. He wriggled round until he could feel the sword's handle, and slowly managed to pull it free. With his foot, he pushed it hard up the front of the van.

When they stopped and the doors were opened, he was out like a shot, giving them no time to see the green object on the floor. Inside the station he was uncuffed and ordered to empty his pockets.

"What I don't understand," John said to the stern faced desk sergeant, "I was arrested by armed police, who would mean that I am considered dangerous, yet I wasn't searched for any sort of weapon."

The desk cop looked puzzled, "armed police?" he turned towards the two cops who had brought him in and gave them an inquiring glance.

"It's true," the beaky nosed one said, "we were real surprised to see them, but you don't ask Lange any questions."

"Well I'm going to ask some bloody questions," the red-faced sergeant spat. "Right, let's get you into a cell."

John followed him obediently, wondering just what the hell was going on. Why had this Lange bloke acted like he had?

He had an hour to sit and wonder why. And when he met Lange, the hate that filled the mans eyes was enough to freeze the heart of a snowman all over again.

Mitch was marching round the room so energetically that Mattie was scared that she would have to replace the carpet before its time.

"Sit down Mitch, you're making me dizzy."

He threw himself into the nearest seat and sat poised like a cat ready to pounce on its prey.

"What are we going to do, just what the hell are we going to do?" he queried, his voice rising.

"There is nothing we can do until the morning," Mattie replied, calmly.

"What have they arrested him for, that bastard wouldn't even tell me that much." then conscious of what he had said, he grinned at Mattie and added, "excuse my French."

"Oh la la," Mattie raised her hands in mock disgust, "such language."

Mitch settled into the chair a bit more comfortably.

"I'll ring the station and try and find out what I can," Mattie declared, trying to relieve Mitch's unease.

"But I've tried already, they won't tell you anything."

"I'll tell them that I am his wife."

"But he's not married, and as far as I know, he never has been."

"Maybe they don't know that." she winked.

They didn't know that, but it didn't do any good, the man on the other end was polite but firm, he couldn't tell her anything at this time, if she rang back in the morning they would have something for her then.

"Right lets make this easy," Lange growled, "where are the bodies?"

"What bodies?"

"I'll say it again. What have you done with the bodies of those poor kids?"

"I don't know where any bodies are!" John yelled.

Lange got up from his desk, and standing in front of John, drew his hand back, then hit him full in the face, sending him flying across the room.

John picked himself off the floor, and checking his mouth, found that it was bleeding freely. "Look, I know my rights, you can't question me without a solicitor, or without someone else present in the room," he blurted out through his swollen lips.

"Yes, you are quite right," Lange smiled, and moved up to John again, "but what rights did Roy have?"

John suddenly felt a pain explode in his groin and sank to the floor, tears mixing with blood forming a steadily growing pool round his legs.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

John felt the hot pain in his arm as a bullet smashed into it, and it was the signal for him to move. He could feel the warm air against his cheek as another slug hurtled past, missing him by a matter of a fraction of an inch, and then he was on the cop. The pain in his shoulder was gone as he used his fists like clubs on the already beaten gunman. Before he realised what was happening, the man's face was a bloody pulp. John stared in horror. Had he done this? He cursed the limp body for turning him into a monster, but any sorrow or regret was quickly dispelled as he remembered the image of his friend flying through the air and hitting the ground like a discarded trash bag.

He ran over to the still form and had to use all his will power to look. It was as though someone had taken a tin of red paint and done a re-spray on the reporter. Only it wasn't red, not a red you see on films, it was more like purple.

A wild thought sprang to mind. So blood's really purple, all this time you thought it was red, but no, it's purple.

"And shit still stinks, and we are up to our necks in it," an unsteady voice cracked.

"Mitch!" John cried, wide eyed, "you're still alive."

"I wouldn't like to place bets on it," the reporter rasped.

John looked down at the blood-strewn body and thought that he wouldn't like to bet on it either. By the wheezing sound that kept escaping from the blueing lips, he was sure that the bullet had punctured a lung at the very least.

The blood that was flowing from his friend's mouth was frothing up and it made it almost impossible for him to understand what Mitch was trying to say.

"Take it easy, I'll get you out of here," John soothed.

Mitch shook his head slightly, "no, just go before they come for you," he rattled out in between breaths.

"I'm not going to leave you," John argued.

"Just call an ambulance, and piss off will you," Mitch said, doing his best impression of a smile.

John hesitated a moment then started towards the house. Suddenly he remembered that he had seen a mobile phone in Lange's car. And at least they wouldn't be able to trace the call on a mobile, at least he didn't think so, but then again, what would it matter if they did?

The cop was still in the same position as John had left him, and he wondered if he had killed him. Funnily enough, the thought didn't worry him in the slightest. With the tip of his boot he flipped the body over, and a low groan told him that the man was still alive, although John swore that if Mitch died Lange wouldn't be far behind him.

The call was abrupt, they wanted to know more details, but John had no intentions of staying on the line any longer than he needed to. Although he knew that he should get as far away from the place as possible, he didn't want to move until he knew that Mitch was going to be alright.

He climbed over the gate and felt an icy finger claw at his chest. He took a deep breath, but even the air hurt his lungs. He just wasn't strong enough for this, he just couldn't take anymore. He scrambled over the gate to the road side again and felt the warmer air flow through his body.

"What's the matter, don't like the cold?" A voice mocked. John shot a look at the cop, but the body was still limp and the eyes closed.

The voice hadn't come from Lange, but from within. At the sound of sirens, John leapt over the gate for a third time. This time the air remained the same. He scrambled along the hedge for twenty feet or so, and found a bare patch through which he could observe his friend clearly.

Behind the ambulance were three cop cars and a meat wagon. It was a funny name for the van, what it really was, was a mobile cell.

Knowing who the cell was for, after seeing Mitch being lifted into the ambulance, John made a move. Ducking as low as he could and still be able to run, he made for the shadows of the trees on the far side of the field.

He heard voices behind. It was as though the cops knew his every move. He hadn't given any names, so how the hell did they know he was up here.

The low clouds were doing a good job of blanking out the light, and hopefully the cold night would make the police search a half hearted one, but he couldn't bank on it, so taking no chances he set off at a low run once more.

"There he goes!" A harsh voice broke through the night like a missile.

No longer bothering to keep low, John set off at an Olympic sprint, tensing his back, waiting for the bullet to crash into his spine. But the bullet didn't come, only the sound of running feet and angry voices.

He stole a glance behind and found that at least three coppers were as fast a runner as he was, no better, because even in that short glimpse he could see them closing the gap between them.

Suddenly John ran headlong into a wall. But there was no wall. Just a mist. But the mist had knocked him flat on his back. Getting to his feet he made a run at the mist once more. Again he was knocked on his arse.

"What the hell is this?" he hissed.

"Stay on the ground!" A cruel voice ordered from behind.

John tried to get to his feet, but fell headlong into the mist. This time the mist didn't knock him back. Instead it seemed to suck him in. And straight away John cursed himself for not staying on the ground as he was ordered. He knew that whatever those cops had in mind for him would be a picnic compared to what was about to happen.

There was an eerie silence; the policemen after him were no longer in sight. John shot round expecting a hand to grab him at any moment, but the field was empty. Everything was bathed completely in a soft red glow, and the trees were no longer bare, they were now covered in lush green leaves.

But as John watched, they seemed to take on a life of their own, they started to convulse, and as they curled up they turned from reddish green to a burnt black, then

came a slight breeze, and the leaves vanished. John got to his feet and started walking round aimlessly, after all, where was he to go? The field was no longer the field that he knew; it now looked like a scene from an old 50's movie about the planet mars.

That must be it, John thought, I fell and I'm out cold having one hell of a dream. He gave himself a sharp kick to the ankle and the pain that shot through his leg was no dream.

He was suddenly aware of hundreds, or what seemed like hundreds, of dark shadows darting all around him. They were just like the ones he had seen on his first day back in Buckley. And as he remembered the rotten faces of the zombies sprung to mind.

"Well sod that," he said aloud, braking into a trot, "I'm not hanging about waiting for them to join the party." As he trotted, he felt as though he was on a trampoline, the ground seemed to rise with every footfall. And when his foot landed, the ground threw him one way and then the other, and if he tried to change direction, the floor just chucked him back in the direction he was going, it was as if he was being herded.

The black forms stayed at a distance and remained on either his left or right, they no longer darted in front of him. John wasn't sure if they were there as guards, or as some sort of protection for him. He shouted out, but got no reply.

Suddenly the red glow vanished and was replaced by a bright yellow light. John could see that the bright yellow light was coming from a large fire. As he drew nearer, he was aware of something digging into his back, he reached round and was surprised when he studied the object in his hand. It was the small green toy sword. He couldn't remember picking it up out of the police van. The last time he had seen the sword was

when he hid it in the back of the police van that had picked him up, and he was certain that he hadn't been back to retrieve it.

It must have been planted on him by that shit Lange. As if it wasn't bad enough that they thought he was a cop killer, he would have a hell of a job explaining the Childs sword. And, if Lange had gone to the trouble of planting the object on him, then it was certain that they knew that one of the missing children had had the toy with him when he had disappeared.

Yes, he would have one hell of a job explaining that one. Doing his best to rub off any finger prints with his sleeve, he tossed the to aside.

Suddenly there was a strange, strangled noise from the marching divisions of ghost soldiers either side, and after a moment of darting about they vanished.

John felt the heat from the licking flames crawl across his skin, but a cold chill was travelling down his spine. An odd chanting sound filled the air, which seemed to be coming from all sides, but even as John looked around he knew that it was coming from the other side of the huge fire.

Skirting round the fire, he followed the chant. Slowly, the form of a child came into view.

The girl from his dreams. The girl from the photograph. Sandra Rawlings.

He knew now, without having to see, where the noise was coming from. Who the noise was coming from.

"Hi son, glad you could make it!" Rasped a deep, grating voice.

John swirled round and was confronted by a huge figure, complete with snakes head and the strips of rotting flesh dangling from all over his body.

"Well dad," John responded sarcastically, "I didn't really have much choice, did I?"

The death like figure seemed to glide above the ground, and with in moments was at John's side. John could smell the stench of death and all that was evil. He tried to pull away, but a huge arm shot round his shoulders in what felt like a hug.

John felt like vomiting. Not just from the smell, but from the very idea that this creature was giving him a hug. Hell he could see the mockery in the beast's eyes.

"What's the matter son, mad at me?"

"Just what the hell do you want from me?" John hissed, breaking free from the vice like grip.

"Oh hell be the right word, Johnnie boy," his father grinned, wagging a finger, "and I want you to join me."

"Why don't you just kill me and be damned, we can both rot in hell then!"

"Hey son, you got me all wrong," his father gasped, taking a few steps back in mock hurt, "I don't want to kill you, and I certainly don't want you to join me in hell."

"But I thought that was your plan," John stammered, now uncertain, "that's why you killed all those children, and that's why you had me kill Roy."

"Yep, that's true."

"Then I'm the final part!" John yelled, his anger boiling, "you need my blood to be able to return to this earth."

"Ah yes, now yes you are right there, I do need your blood to return, but I don't need you dead."

John let the words sink in, "you want to feed off me, like bloody Dracula! You can piss off!" He screamed.

"Tut, tut, son. Don't get that blood boiling," the creature laughed, "you haven't heard my deal yet."

"Deal," John gasped, "you think I would make a deal with you?"

"I can make you immortal too."

"And I suppose I can wear the uniform as well," John spat, pointing with disgust at the decaying flesh tassels.

"Oh this," the evil model swirled, "this is a little number I like to wear when I am entertaining guests."

John realised that through out his exchange of words with his father, the young girl had not moved, nor spoken a word.

"Don't worry about her," the creature gibed, following his gaze, "she can not see or hear you."

"Then why is she here, and just who is she?" John asked.

"She's here as my play thing to torment and torture when I feel like it, and as for who she is, haven't you guessed?"

"I know that she's Sandra Rawlings," John said, puzzled, "but I don't know who Sandra Rawlings is."

"Oh you are thick," the monster rebuked, "join me and you will discover the darkest secrets."

"Well that is a mighty fine offer, but I will have to decline," John replied decisively, "so I will be on my way and I'll take the child with me."

As he reached down to untie the girl, an ear splitting roar erupted from the now infuriated fiend.

"I said I didn't have to kill you," it bellowed, "but now I'm going to take great pleasure in crushing you!"

John ducked, and nearly fell head first into the fire as the creature lunged, his face now an angry purple.

"Now come on daddy, don't be mad," John mocked bravely. Only he didn't feel brave, his heart was racing, pounding at his chest like a locomotive steam engine. As the drooling skin clad man attacked again, John threw himself to the ground and rolled into the tree trunk legs. It was like rolling into a rock, and John felt his ribs cry out in alarm.

His father staggered a moment and then slowly started to fall backwards into the licking flames. John watched as the hungry flames greeted their visitor, completely covering the body.

But to John's amazement, the figure shot up straight and let out a long cruel laugh. "So you want to fry yaw papa, do yaw?" he mocked.

John turned to untie the girl once more, but she was gone. And in her place was a large rat, teeth bared and a strange hissing noise coming from its flared nostrils. Before John could move, the rat threw itself into the air and attached its fangs to his neck. He reached for the creature, and despite the fact that normally he couldn't even touch a mouse, let alone a rat; he grabbed the hairy body and squeezed with as much strength he could muster.

It did the trick, the rat let go of its grip and John threw it into the fire with its master.

"What's the matter?" His father said, stepping out of the fire, "Jerry only wanted to get to know you better."

John took a step back, and felt the blood flowing freely down his neck. It repulsed him to think that the rat had actually touched him, let alone bite him. He was about to wipe the blood off, when the drooling man leapt at him.

"Allow me." he slurped.

John felt gross lips sucking at his neck and a red hot fire surged through his veins. This can not be for real, he thought; it's like some crummy vampire movie. He was suddenly aware of something in his hand, and he gazed down in awe. It was the green sword. He didn't know how, but it was in his hand once more.

For it to keep returning there must be a reason. Although John felt silly, he lunged at the feasting monster. And to his astonishment the sword went easily through everything in its path.

His father screamed in agony and reeled backwards. "It's to late son," he gasped, and then he was gone, only a foul odour was left in his wake.

John felt the air knocked out of his lungs and a cold mist fall all around him making him cringe in pain.

When he opened his eyes, he was now about ten yards behind his search party. So keeping low to the ground, he started to back track, his mind reeling. Could it be true? Was that his entire father needed? Could he now return to the world to carry on with his evil practice, and if so who could stop him?

John reached the hedge and skirted it the length of the field, and although there was an easy exit there, he opted for the more painful path, and climbed, dragged and scratched his way through the dividing hedge and into the adjoining field.

After about fifteen minutes, he was well away from the search party and on the outskirts of town. All kind of thoughts ran through his mind, but none of them of any use.

He couldn't go to the house that was for sure, and it was certain that they would be watching Mattie's place. Of course, that was it; he would go to Mitch's. He wondered how his friend was doing, and the thought made him angry and filled him with more determination.

Reaching some houses, he darted into the back alleyway, and finding a gate unlocked, and also by a hundred to one chance, a shed unlocked, he rolled up into a ball and made the shed into his home for the night. He had decided that he would be better off moving in the day light.

As sleep was about to claim him, he had a sudden urge to call Mattie, every nerve in his body cried out that she was in danger.

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

He tried telling himself that Mattie was fine, and that he was worrying over nothing. But he felt that it was not just nothing that something was wrong, and no matter how hard he tried, sleep evaded him.

"To hell with this," he mumbled, leaving the sanctuary of his hiding place.

The night sky was like deep velvet, with a thousand diamonds splattered across its soft texture. And these diamonds radiated light, so much light that it was almost day. The only clouds visible that night came from John's mouth every time he breathed, which was something he had to do, even though he felt that every such cloud was like sending out smoke signals to the police who were searching for him.

"Hey guys, I'm down here, come and get me!" His last breath cried as he half walked, half jogged down the deserted sidewalk. He remembered the streets of Buckley well, and was glad that nothing much had changed. He wasn't happy however when he rounded the next corner and instead of seeing the phone box he remembered when he was a kid, there was now a statue.

It just loomed over him, mocking him. John swore at it and jogged past without seeing who it was of. The next phone box he remembered was still there, and as he picked up the receiver he wasn't surprised to hear the dialling tone, after all, the vandals would not bother with this one, and well it was just across the road from the bloody police station.

John felt totally naked, standing in the box, but he also felt a rush of excitement at his little show of defiance. He felt the knot in his stomach tighten when, after what felt like a lifetime, the phone was answered.

But the voice on the other end wasn't that of Mattie, it was a stern harsh voice. "Who is this?" it demanded of the silence.

John felt like yelling, I know who I am, but who the fuck are you? But instead he asked feebly, "Is Mattie there pleased?"

"Who is this?" The voice repeated, belligerently. John had a sudden thought that maybe this was a boyfriend.

"Who are you, and where's Mattie?" He snapped back, just as truculently.

"I'll ask the questions," the voice barked.

He knew now that the voice on the other end belonged to a cop, it was a bloody classic cop quote.

So his feelings were correct, something had happened, but what? Was she dead? He felt his body cry out in denial. He slammed the phone down in its cradle and gave the glass box a hefty kick. The glass groaned a little then bent the toe of his cowboy boot back sending a pain shooting through his foot, he yelled out and kicked it again.

He cursed himself for the second onslaught, and cringed at the bloody racket he was making. Glancing over his shoulder at the cop shop, he saw, with relief that no one was coming to investigate the strange man fighting with the telecom box.

Sinking his head down deep into his shoulders, John resumed his half walk, half trot, only now he had the added extra of a limp! He realised that it could be dangerous to go to Mattie's house, but he did not know what else he could do. Or, what he was going to do when he got there for that matter.

He saw headlights coming his way and instinctively dived over the nearest garden wall. Seeing the police car vanish round the corner, he congratulated himself on his intuition. If he had been just that little bit slower, he could have ended up in the cells and of no use to Mattie.

A voice chirped up in the back of his mind, "who is to say you are any use to her anyway?" John closed the thought out completely. Although he had no way of knowing for sure, he was certain that she hadn't had an accident, and whatever had happened to

her was his fault. His fault because he hadn't stopped his father, and it was his blood that had brought him back. Mattie's house was in the next street, so he decided to approach it commando style.

Ducking down a driveway, he started to make his way through hedges, fences, and six bloody walls. The back gardens were in shadows, which did a little bit for his confidence. A little, but not much.

With his back as tight as he could get it to the brickwork, he slowly edged forward until he could see Mattie's house opposite and still remain in the shadows. The house seemed alright at first glance and John was tempted to walk straight over to it, but he held back. Which was a good thing, as two policemen, whispering together came into view and took up residence outside the front gates.

Why are they in full view if they are trying to catch me, John thought, and another thing, why had the cop answered the phone, if anything that would scare him off. As John strained his eyes, he noticed something strange about the front door. Well strange wasn't the best word to use, but the fact that the front door was no longer on its hinge's but now carpeted the pathway was bloody strange indeed.

If somebody was going to kick the door in, which is the way that it opens, into the house, then the door would have been lying inside the hall. But the way it looked, was as though it had been kicked from the inside and landed on the path. And as John could now see, had taken the whole door frame with it.

John knew, without doubt, that his father had played a visit upon Mattie, but why? Well that was simple, to get at him. But more to the point, how did he know about her? Could his father read his mind? He seemed to be one step ahead all the time. Had he been running his life all these years? It sure would account for all the shitty luck he had

had. He shrugged this idea off; it would be too easy to blame all his past failures onto his, up to this point, unknown father.

John stared across at the policeman as his mind reeled with unwelcome thoughts. I've got to find out what's happened, he told himself.

"Maybe I can help you with that one," a voice whispered. John whirled round, but the driveway behind was empty. He turned back to the two cops; maybe one of them had spoken. But they were still standing outside the house. As John stared at them, he realised that something was not right. The little clouds had disappeared. He had let out a long breath and a cloud of frosty air bellowed into the night.

He glanced at the cops, but he still couldn't see any clouds, and another strange thought hit him, they hadn't moved, not an inch. He reached down and found a small stone, and after a moments debate on whether to throw it at one of the cops, he flung it at the wall behind.

The sudden crack split the night sky and John gritted his teeth, expecting them to come rushing over at any moment. But they didn't move. John stepped out into the light, but neither of them took any notice of him. He suddenly felt that he was the only survivor on earth, or that he had side stepped into a parallel dimension.

Each step seemed to be on a cushion of air as he floated towards the house, his legs hardly moved, it felt as though he was on the end of a line and that someone was slowly winding him in.

As he drew close to the two statues, he reached out and touched the nearest one. As his hand landed on the mans face, the flesh seemed to ripple like a bowl of water, and Johns hand went straight through. He pulled his hand back quickly and examined it. It was dry, but as he rubbed it he felt an electric shock drive through his body. It wasn't a bad shock, but he still felt as though his hair was standing on end, he studied the mans face, it looked like glass, and there was no ripples and no indication that Johns hand had just been visiting.

He continued up the path and stopped dead. The door was back in its rightful place. Panic hit him and he turned to run, but instead of seeing the two police statue forms, he was now confronted by a wall of mist, which felt as though it was challenging him to try and run through it.

John decided to go on. He reached out for the door handle, but that too rippled like the policeman's face and his hand disappeared. John remembered seeing a film, one of the 'nightmares on elm street sagas' where the very same thing happened, and Freddie was waiting on the other side.

And John knew that his very own Freddie was waiting on the other side for him, and he felt a chill rush through his bones. Taking a deep breath, he charged through the door. He felt as though a million fingers were trying to claw at him, but finally they gave up, and he fell through into the other side.

Freddie wasn't waiting for him on the other side. No one was waiting for him. The house was just a house, just like he remembered it. The only thing that felt different was the cold that was enveloping him. It had now completely covered the front door.

John knew that he was being herded, just like cattle. To the slaughter? As he listened, a sinister laugh came echoing down the stairs.

"Glad you could make it boy, "a voice rattled after it, "why don't you come on up and join us."

John placed his foot on the first step and had the feeling of being a condemned man climbing up to the gallows. His footfalls made no sound, just like outside he felt that he was walking on air. As he arrived at the top landing him felt light headed and reached out for the banister to steady him.

But just like everything else, this too rippled and swallowed his hand. Blinking rapidly, he regained his balance. So he wasn't really in the house, was it a dream? Or had he really gone into another dimension?

The laugh was coming from the room straight ahead. John guessed it was a bedroom. Without even trying the door, he walked straight through it, once more feeling the tiny claws grasping his body.

He emerged on the other side with a slight 'pop' and shivered involuntarily, and just as he had expected, there was his now familiar skin draped, foul smelling father.

"Hi dad," he said, sarcastically, "So what's new?"

"Hi son, so glad you could make it," the skin creature smirked in a mock welcome, and moved away from the bed to reveal a peacefully sleeping Mattie.

John gasped and moved forwards, but breathed a little easier when he saw that she didn't show any obvious sign of injury.

"Doesn't she look so sweet and innocent," his father drooled.

John was bewildered. Was Mattie here and the police are guarding her, or was she a dream just like him. As if trying to answer his own question, he reached out and touched the sleeping figure. Unlike anything else he touched, Mattie did not ripple, but his hand didn't meet with a solid form, instead it went into her shoulder and disappeared, and the space that it had taken inside her body disappeared also.

The more he reached into her, the more they both started disappearing. He pulled his hand back quickly as a thought shot through his mind. Maybe you're hurting her, maybe even killing her, it shrieked.

A cold laugh ripped through his senses, and he glared at the foul creature watching him with obvious amusement.

"Oh son, I can see you are confused," he smirked, "I know. Am I here or am I dreaming is she real or is she a dream, or are we both dreams? Oh so many questions."

John felt the hatred swell up inside him and threaten to explode; he fought the feeling, and managed to contain it, but knew that he would draw on it later.

"Okay, I'll try and help you," his father sighed, as though he was doing John a huge favour," to start with; you're not here, well not at this moment. What you see, is what has happened, so in that case I suppose you are not really talking to me. Oh well, on with the show then."

Before John could say anything, his father had produced a skeleton hand with razor sharp nails and caressed it across the sleeping women's face. John stared in horror as four

tiny wounds opened up and the red liquid seemed to roll out onto the white cheeks before trickling down the neck and making a nasty mess on the sheets.

"Let me explain, Johnnie boy," his father reeled on him as he took a step forward, "I'm not here either, you can't touch me, it seems that the small amount of blood I had from you wasn't enough to bring me back."

"So how come you can touch her, and why!" John yelled, his voice reaching a peak and bursting out.

"Well that was a blessing," the creature smiled, "there I was not knowing what I was going to do when suddenly I felt someone dreaming about me, oh, and you, not just anyone but someone with really talented powers, but sadly she doesn't know it, otherwise she most certainly would not have dreamt about me. But the thing is she did, and here I am."

Snarling, John leapt at the huge figure, but never reached it. He left the ground, even moved towards his father, but that was as far as it went. He was back outside the bedroom door.

Was the dream over; was he now inside the house for real? He tried the door handle and felt the ripple once more and pushed on inside.

"Tut, tut, that was naughty," the figure laughed, wagging a skeletal finger towards him, "you are here to watch, not to participate."

The creature pulled the covers back, and slashed at the still sleeping form on the bed. The flowers on Mattie's nightdress turned a red and then vanished. Still Mattie never woke up. John was thankful for that, if she was still asleep then she couldn't be feeling any pain, could she?

The snake headed creature now proceeded to rip the bed covers to shreds and sling them in all corners of the room. The wardrobe and whatever else got in the way was the next to feel old, snaky's wrath.

John suddenly realised that although he was watching this mass destruction going on, he was seeing it, but not hearing it. It was as though he was watching a silent movie. Another thing that caught his attention was weird, wired even for him. The furniture was bleeding too.

The walls, carpet and ceiling were completely caked in blood, the whole room looked like a slaughterhouse and the smell of death that filled the room brought bile to John's lips. He struggled to keep the vomit down, he remembered the last time when it cut short his dream, and he didn't want this dream cut short.

He tried desperately to come up with an idea that would save Mattie, but what could he do? He had no way of stopping his father and his father seemed intent on showing him exactly what he had done.

John looked at the sleeping Mattie and to his surprise, although there was still a hell of a lot of blood, the wounds on her cheeks seemed to be healing.

So maybe his father couldn't hurt her after all, he was just making him see his worst nightmare. Although Mattie's face had returned to normal, the room still remained a mess, and the blood that covered the place was still there, just about on everything.

John looked down at himself and realised, with horror, that he too was covered in the foul smelling liquid. Although it looked like blood, it didn't smell like blood, it smelt like nothing John could imagine.

"Well son," snake head snarled, in between hurling a table lamp at the far wall, "it looks as though your friend is looking a little better," he took a swipe with the razor claw and opened up the flesh on Mattie's face once more.

Although John felt his stomach churn, he told himself that it was alright, that it wasn't happening, Mattie could not feel a thing.

The creature turned its evil glare towards John, "so that's what you think?" he growled and reached over to Mattie. He put a large hand round her throat, dragged her out of bed and held her, feet dangling above the carpet.

Mattie tried to scream, but the scream was just like a breath of air as the huge hand tightened its grip. Now John had his doubts. Although she had not opened her eyes, Mattie looked as though she was feeling the pain.

Panic rushed through John, what could he do? He was about to dive at his father once more when an idea hit him. Instead of throwing himself at the beast, he dived into the dangling Mattie. He could see their bodies disappearing as they joined together.

He hadn't a clue what would happen, but all he could think about was that she would vanish; she would no longer be in the evil grip of his father. Suddenly the room faded away and he was in total darkness, he couldn't feel anything around him. He reached out for Mattie, but there was nothing. He was simply floating in a complete void.

Suddenly a hollow laugh split through the darkness, "well done son," the voice bellowed, "You did just exactly what I knew you would do. You were right, I couldn't touch her, but thanks to your quick thinking you have now transported her into my world, but there's not enough room for the both of you."

A bright light came crashing forth and hit John full in the body, and he felt himself flying for a moment and then a sharp pain shot through his back.

His eyes felt like lead as he passed out.

CHAPTER TWENTY.

As the misty veil lifted, he found himself staring at the two policemen outside Mattie's house. He was in the driveway opposite and he quickly ducked back into the shadows as he tried to gather his thoughts.

A thin bead of sweat trickled down his forehead despite the biting November cold. Was he even in the house, or did he dream it all? He hadn't dreamt it he decides, with all the things that had been happening he was bloody sure of that. So if he hadn't dreamed

the whole thing up, then that brought him back to the subject of Mattie. What the hell had happened in the house? He remembered jumping into her, and seeing her fade, and him for that matter, so it left the question, where had she faded too?

To grey. What? To grey, a voice said inside his head, and the words from a song from the past sprang to mind. He cursed himself for the stupid thoughts that had invaded his mind at a time like this.

"Maybe not grey." he spoke aloud, "green," It was so obvious that it had to be the place, after all, the field had been the cause of all his problems, it all boiled down to the bloody field, so where else could she have been taken?

John slipped back behind the house without the two coppers opposite ever knowing he had been there.

Would this nightmare ever end, he wondered, why didn't he just go up to the field and say 'hi dad, take me,' and be done with it? But he knew that he wasn't going to do that. Was it because he was a coward? He didn't think so. Not that he was a brave man by a long chalk, no, it was just that he had a hatred burning inside him now that was egging him on.

So many children had died, and so many people had been hurt by their deaths. And all at the hands of his father, HIS father, he felt ashamed, and although it was nonsense, he felt to blame. The guilt of his father, that was a laugh, until recently he hadn't even been able to remember what that son of a bitch even looked like. God, how he wished he could make it return that way.

Now, all he saw was his father's face, and he wanted to smash that face until it was nothing more than the dead skins that hung off his body. The thought of Mitch lying in some hospital bed fighting for his life, maybe even dead, sent a rage hurtling through John's body, giving him a deeper inner strength.

He quickened his pace, retracing his steps from what felt like a life time ago, keeping a careful watch for any police, but being a little more reckless than he had been on the way to Mattie's house. Now that he knew what had happened to her, or at least felt he knew, he had a purpose, a job to do. And this was one job that he had to do right.

John made good time, and reached the lane that led up to his house without incident. As he approached he could see the police car parked by the gate. He searched along the hedge until he found the hole in which he had left by earlier. Ignoring the thorns ripping at his skin, he dived through.

As he emerged out on the other side he felt a strange sensation was about him. The sky, that had been clear just a moment ago, was now clouded over and he felt spots of rain the size of his fist fall suddenly. Within moments he was soaked to the skin. But strangely, he didn't feel wet.

He stood up, not bothered about being seen. If he was right, then there was no one to see him anyhow. He had the feeling that he was now in another time, he had just stepped through a void, and the cops were no longer outside the field waiting for him. To prove a point, he tried looking over the hedge, but the hedge was now taller, and a lot thicker, with lush green leaves.

This, and the fact that although it was raining, it was still warm, told John that at a guess it was either August, or September, it definitely wasn't late November any more. He headed for the cluster of trees where all the bodies had been found. As he neared them he could now make out flames stabbing up at the night sky, throwing off tiny sparks like shooting stars.

As he drew closer, he could see the scene clearly, it was the scene from a thousand nightmares that he knew so well. As he approached, the skin clad figure stopped his dancing and turned to greet him, "Well hi son, I knew you would come."

"Where's Mattie?" John demanded.

"Oh she's not here," his father grinned, "I'm sorry if that's what you was expecting."

"Then where is she you bastard?" John hissed, hatred filling his voice.

"You won't really understand this, but she's at home."

"Bu-but she disappeared, I made her disappear," John stammered.

"You did, but she's still there, it's just that you can't feel or see her," he gave an evil laugh at John's puzzlement; "she'll come back when you are dead, don't worry."

"Oh, so you have decided that you are going to kill me now," John mocked, trying to sound braver than he felt.

"It's nothing personal. But the mere drop of blood I had from you been enough to bring me back, so I've decided that I'll take it all, if it's all the same to you."

"Over my dead body!!" John yelled, and then suddenly felt foolish.

"Well that's what I had in mind," his father laughed.

"Please help me," a soft voice whispered. John noticed that the girl in the chair was awake and could clearly see him. "Untie her," he ordered.

"Or what?" The skin clad figure mocked, "You will make me?"

"Take it easy Sandra, I'll help you," John soothed.

"Oh you know her then?" The beast said, surprised.

"Yes I know who she is, Sandra Rawlings, just one of the children you killed thirty years ago." John hissed.

"Not just one of the children," his father pointed out, "she was the last, just like you will be."

John didn't grasp the point of his words. "But if I stop you now, then she won't be the last, and there won't be any more after her."

"Oh my dear boy, you can't stop me," the foul smelling figure scoffed, "and I must say, you really are thick."

John looked puzzled.

"I followed everything I had to do," his father went on, "I killed all those brats, I killed a close friend, then finally drank her blood," he pointed at the cowering child and yelled furiously, "I was meant to become immortal, but as you know, it didn't work."

"Why would her blood make you immortal?" John asked, bewildered.

"Because she's your sister, you dumb shit!!" The beast screamed.

The words cut into John like a knife, making him incapable of a response.

"You really hadn't worked it out, had you?" his father mocked, "your mother tried to get her away from me, but I found the family who had adopted her, but it didn't work."

"Then why aren't you dead and resting in peace?" growled John, recovering himself a little.

"Now that is a good question," his father mused, "and I have no answers. For years after I killed your sister, and in turn was killed myself, I lay dormant, unable to do anything but let time go by, and watch as your sister tried, in her puny way, to get you to come and lay her soul to rest. But when you moved away, even she couldn't reach you." John watched as his father tried to find the words to tell his story, it was almost as if it pained him.

"But when your aunt died, Sandra here received a new lease of life. She found you and could tell that you had no intentions of coming back home, so the little darling got you the sack, so where else could you go, being a bum an all, but home. But she didn't know that like her, my powers had grown and I had already set my plan into action. But I let her do all the work, and she only realised the truth when it was too late, so now I will be able to have my two off springs blood, and this time I wont fail, my reward will be immortality."

"You're wrong!" John yelled, "I'll stop you, and you will rot in hell!!!"

"Before you do anything rash," his father jeered, "think of the down side for you."

"Down side for me, what down side could there be?" John screamed.

"Well let's say you manage to kill me, and then you won't exist. You see, at this moment in time, you haven't been born, so if you kill me, then you kill yourself as well," his father grinned, pleased at the impact of his words.

"No, you're lying," John said, finally, "I can clearly remember the night you was killed, so I must have been born then."

"Oh I am sorry," his father mocked, "did I lead you to believe I was killed straight after your sisters death? My mistake, you see your mother and Roy didn't find out about it until a long time after."

"I guess I will have to take the chance that you are laying," said John after moments thought, "and even if you are not, then it's a price I'm willing to pay."

Before his father could respond, John threw himself across the fire and took the huge figure by surprise.

Although he received the full force, his father didn't go down; he swayed slightly but remained on his feet, while John slid to the ground, winded. The beast drew back his foot and kicked John, sending him sprawling across the wet grass.

John heard his ribs break before he felt the pain, and when the pain came it felt like no other pain he had ever known. His whole side felt as though it was on fire and as he tried to get to his feet, a warm gush of blood vomited from his mouth, almost choking him, sending another bolt of agony to his ribs.

Before he could get to his feet the brute was beside him, sending another kick to the side of his face. John felt the cheek bone crumble under the heavy attack, and stars cascaded forth, blocking out his vision. And the next blow. This time the foot landed on

his arm, breaking it cleanly in two, and through the haze that surrounded him, John could hear the evil laugh.

"You thought you were a match for me, I will deal with you after I've dealt with your sister."

John heard the cry of alarm come from the small girl as the beast made his way over to her. He fought desperately to clear his head, but knew that at any moment he might black out. Clutching under his shirt, he felt the warm handle of the green sword. It was only a kiddies toy, but it had helped him once before. That was in a nightmare though, this was no longer a nightmare, and this was real.

He managed to get to his feet as the snake monster reached the captured child.

"I'm not finished with you," John screamed, his words coming out slurred from his now lop sided mouth.

His father turned impatiently, pissed off by the delay. Seeing the puny sword in John's hand, he let out a harsh bellow of laughter, "do you really think you can stop me with that!" he spat.

With more strength than he had known he possessed, John lunged at the skin clad tormentor, and felt with pleasure the tiny plastic blade slice through skin and hit bone.

His father screamed out in rage, and grabbed John by the throat, shaking him like a rag doll.

A hundred visions cascaded through his mind. The digging up of the bodies, the cats, the strange woman calling herself Sindy Rawlings, could she have been Sandra? The death of Roy, the shooting of Mitch, and of Mattie. He couldn't let all this be in vain. He struck out wildly with the plastic sword, noting with satisfaction that it was finding its mark.

The hands round his neck slackened and John easily knocked them away. He looked into the eyes of his father, now the mockery had gone from those eyes, it was replaced with pain, something that John had never thought could happen.

John thrust the sword into the huge mans stomach and twisted it like a corkscrew.

The skins that hung from his body were now a dark red, but it wasn't the blood from his victims, it was his own blood, and his father stared down at it, unable to believe it.

"How can this be," he stammered, "how can an innocent Childs toy do this?"

John suddenly realised how, "because it belonged to an innocent child, a child guilty of nothing, but you still took his life."

As John watched the creature sink to the ground, a loud crack of thunder rolled over head, and the rain came down even more heavily, mixing with the blood, forming a large pool round the sorry sight on the floor. The fir crackled as the rain fell into it, and a bolt of lightning fell from the sky, missing the fallen creature by a matter of feet.

John smelt the scorched earth, and watched in horror as it opened up and about ten or twelve dark forms spewed from the gaping hole. They were the same creatures he had seen on his first visit to the field, and they darted all around in the darkened sky, only their fierce red eyes showing.

John held the sword up in an attempt to ward them off, but they made no effort to attack him. He edged his way over to the sobbing girl, who was watching the spectres intently, but showing no fear.

The plastic blade cut easily through the ropes that bound her and she fell into his arms. Suddenly the night sky was filled with an ear piercing howling, and the dark forms dived down on to the creature in the foul skins. The snakes head upon his own now looked comical.

The creature screamed as they completely smothered him, and within moments, he was gone. The hole in the ground had closed over too. But sticking out of the ground was a small strip of animal skin, soaked in a red dye. This was all that was left to prove that the creature had ever been there. John reached out to pick it up, but could only watch as it slowly slid down into the earth.

"I think we should be going back," a voice said, cutting into Johns thoughts. He opened his eyes, the rain had gone, and it was now light. He turned to face the speaker, and was confronted by Sandra Rawlings, or at least an older version of Sandra. She smiled at him and set off down the field.

"Mum and dad will only get worried." Virtualventures

John started to follow her, but said nothing.

"And you know how big Roy thinks that the police force have got better things to do than look for us, even if it did mean more over time for him," she continued in a mocking tone.

John's thoughts were working overtime. His mum and dad, she was still alive, and his dad was Roy! Suddenly it all fell into place, the reason the creatures plan hadn't worked, when he drank Sandra's blood, and his own, it was simple, they never were his children, Roy had been their father all along. And somehow in his own way, he had been protecting John all these years, until in the end he had even given his own life.

As they drew closer to the house, John could see his mother and Roy waiting for them.

"Come on son, you don't want to be late today," Roy yelled, waving.

John waved back with out thinking, and then noticed that everyone was dressed up in their Sunday best. He glanced down and saw that he also was wearing a fine suit, and in his lapel was a large, red carnation.

John followed his now jogging sister and realised that he wasn't in any pain, in fact he had never felt better, and as he ran along, all the events of that night, and of his past life, slowly melted away.

By the time he reached the gate and vaulted over it, he had no knowledge of his previous existence; he had only one thing on his mind.

The wedding.

His wedding.

And he knew that he could not be late, for today was the happiest day of his life.
Today Mattie was going to become his wife.

THE END.

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