



SONG  
OF THE  
SANDMAN

J-F. DUBEAU

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# PROLOGUE

THE WORST PART about the worst things is that they can happen to anyone. There is no inoculation to catastrophe, no matter how many precautions are taken. Sometimes the fort we build to protect ourselves is the very thing that collapses and buries us alive. The thicker the walls, the heavier the masonry, the more bones get crushed, the more skulls get split. It's the sense of security that becomes the great betrayer, folding in on itself, obliterating all within.

It had taken the better part of a decade for Alice to build those walls. She'd started with nothing but the pieces of a shattered life and whatever emotional tools were available to an eight-year-old. Her shelter was flimsy at first, hastily put together from whatever leftovers of herself she could find. The largest stones her tired and wounded mind could carry were stacked together to form a fragile barricade, one that threatened to crumble at the slightest touch.

And it did crumble. Over and over throughout the years, Alice would have to build again and again. But each time, she found she had more resources to work with, that she could lift heavier materials, and that she knew how to construct a sturdier bastion. One from within which she could protect her battered spirit.

By her sixteenth birthday, Alice had built a veritable fortress. The repetitive drudgery of her routine, however unique, had made her a skilled architect. As long as she didn't step out of line, as long as

she didn't think of all the things she'd never have, it was easy enough for her to endure.

The very trappings of her predicament had become symbolic of her fortress. The bars on the windows no longer served to keep her in, but instead protected her from what was outside. The scratches on the wall, each marking a day in captivity, had been painted over, as she no longer counted the time before she might be rescued or escape.

Incarceration was transfigured into security. Captors were now family; and routine, a shield. Food, lodging, and even some measure of education were provided to her. Other members of her new family had to work one or two jobs, giving up their earnings to the community; meanwhile, all that was required of Alice was that she keep her voice in perfect condition.

As far as she could tell, this was going to be her life until the day she died. Everything was arrayed to keep her safe and healthy and content. She was a delicate music box, kept in perfect working condition, stored in a velvet-lined box for its own protection.

At sixteen, eight years into her imprisonment, Alice's life took another sharp turn.

It started when she heard a loud commotion outside her room one night. Then came the screams. Neither were unusual. The refurbished storeroom Alice called her own was located in the basement of what used to be a school. Members of the family would sometimes move furniture and boxes in and out of storage down here, caring little whether they bothered her with their activities. Sometimes it would be one of her "brothers" or "sisters" who would be dragged down the stairs. Kicking and screaming, they were taken to the lonely darkness of the Reflection Room, a small custodial closet where family members would be locked in solitary confinement if they broke a rule. The Reflection Room smelled of stale blood, urine, and fear. The smell of discipline. One Alice knew from experience.

On this day, Alice had no idea what could be going on and felt no curiosity toward it. Whoever had transgressed would be punished and then welcomed back into the fold. Their sin would be bled out

in fits of painful contrition. Upon hearing the sounds, her thumb quickly pressed the volume control on her earphones to drown them out. So seldom did Alice get an evening to herself; she'd be damned if this one would be ruined because someone had displeased Mother.

Prokofiev blasted loudly in her ears and she bent over her book once again. It had taken time to convince Mother to procure the Harry Potter series for her. Mother had argued that it might give her "ideas." But Alice knew where to draw the line between fantasy and reality. She knew the bars on her window were too narrow for an owl to fly through.

"Alice!"

She snapped her head up at the mention of her name, yanking her earphones off at the sight of Victor Poole. With well-combed graying hair and a dark brown goatee, he was the very picture of a schoolteacher. Or what Alice imagined one would look like. He must have been calling out her name for a moment, as he looked at the end of his wits. His skin was red from exertion and his throat was ragged as he spoke. His maroon cardigan had a large dark stain at the front that looked like spilled oil.

"Alice! Come quick!"

He stood in her doorway, waiting for her to react. But Alice never had visitors. She was kept to a strict schedule and even stricter limitations on where she was allowed to wander. What could Victor Poole possibly want with her? These questions were wandering back and forth through her mind when she heard the wail.

The wailing hadn't come from behind the door of the faraway Reflection Room; it had originated from somewhere closer. The scream had an animal quality to it, the sort of noise that might escape the belly of a wounded dog. High-pitched yet guttural, fraught with agony, it was a plea for release.

"Mister Poole, who's that screaming?" asked her tremulous voice. He didn't answer.

"Is she coming?" Mother's voice echoed down the hallway, delicate yet uncompromising. In the background a drawn-out howl attempted to drown her out.

Before she realized what her thin limbs were doing, Alice climbed out of bed and rushed past Victor, pushing him aside, the flat of her hand pressing into his soiled cardigan.

The hallway underneath the school that she called home was dimly lit by a spine of fluorescent lights. They stretched from the stairs and service elevator, all the way to the other end of the basement. There, another set of stairs was hidden behind a door that said EXIT-SORTIE in glowing red letters. Midway through the hall, a door was pulled open and a small gathering of family members crowded around it.

“You called, Mother?” Alice asked, obedient.

The tension was unmistakable. The two men closest to the door wore masks of abject horror, gray skin across their contorted features. Whatever they were looking at, the source of the tortured screams, Alice couldn’t imagine. The only certain thing was that she wanted no part of it.

The third closest spectator was Mother. Hers was the demeanor of an annoyed supervisor. Arms crossed, back stiff, she glared at Alice with equal parts disdain and impatience. She might as well have been waiting for her to make her bed or get ready for school or finally mow the lawn before the weekend was over. All of this while someone was almost certainly dying a painful death mere feet away.

“This is it, Alice. Time to shine,” Mother said, stepping aside and gesturing calmly toward the open door.

It took a moment for the other two witnesses to realize what Alice was doing and get out of the way. Averting her eyes, Alice stepped up to the threshold, just as another earsplitting scream—this one of a thick, wet quality—burst out of the opening.

She looked back at Mother, preferring to face her impatience than whatever was in that room. She could smell the metallic aroma of fresh blood, feel the rank humidity of sweat and bodily fluids. It was a slaughterhouse that she didn’t want to face alone.

“Hurry,” Mother said, letting just a hint of fear slip through her urging. “You can do this, Alice.”

Taking a deep, blood-scented breath and closing her eyes, Alice turned toward the room. Moist cracking and a frantic gurgle were all she could hear. Knowing she would lose her nerve if she were to take but the smallest of peeks, she instead concentrated on the task at hand.

“Anytime, Alice,” Mother said, through thinly veiled worry.

Another deep breath and Alice began to sing. The song—a sweet, slow lullaby—came out a trembling mess. Alice could picture Mother’s annoyed eyes. She was better than this, more practiced. In fact, when she put her mind to it, as Mother demanded her to do at this precise moment, Alice was perfect.

Voices and noises, screams and echoes, all attempted to ripple the glassy pond of her concentration. A fine, warm mist touched her right cheek and something nudged the tip of her naked foot. But she maintained focus, thinking only of the air as it was pushed out of her lungs. Alice concentrated on how she could manipulate it with her vocal cords, her tongue, the opening of her mouth, even the tilt of her neck. Before long, she was lost in the lullaby. Her mind let go of the physical world surrounding her, abandoning all other senses. Her limbs were gone, as was the ground under her feet. If it weren’t for the need to take in air so that she could sing, she may have even forgotten to breathe.

However long it had been, the room was quiet now. Her only companion was the sound of a slow and ponderous dripping.

Alice slowly cracked open her eyes. They stung from the light and they hurt from the cramped muscles that had kept them shut. While she had been prepared to see the room turned into a butcher shop, the reality far exceeded her imagination.

The singing had put a stop to the butchery, but Mother, along with every other surviving family member, had been put to sleep. They were slumped on the ground, awkward piles of humanity tossed aside with careless abandon. They were the lucky ones. Their chests moved up and down in deep slumber.

Others had been less fortunate.

Alice couldn't tell how many family members had been killed, their remains in a mess of limbs and innards. She thought, if only for a callous moment, that counting heads would do the trick, but even that seemed a challenge.

Among the carnage, she saw a stroke of pale gray in the middle of a crimson tableau—one last survivor. Nestled amid the various body parts like a bird in a nest lay the body of an old man. Ashen and wrinkled and completely naked, his eyes were covered by thick scabs of dried blood. At the center of each wound was a dark iron nail, driven into the socket. Whoever he was, the old man wasn't part of the family. In fact, judging from the viscera covering his hands, he was the one responsible for this massacre.

What Alice didn't know was that the name of the man to whom the body had once belonged was Sam Finnegan.

Feeling her fortitude waver, Alice lifted her left hand to her face. It was the one she had used to push Victor Poole out of her way. Feeling for the first time the sticky wetness between her fingers, she saw that she'd been wrong. It wasn't oil that stained Victor's cardigan, but blood. Blood that was growing stickier as it dried.

Gore, violence, the tangible remains at her fingertips . . . none were what bothered Alice most. That didn't mean she wasn't shaken by the experience, but while she'd been singing to put the old man to sleep, something had sung back to her. An echo of her lullaby. A voice without sound that only she could hear. It was dark and angry, but also wounded and sad.

Standing more alone than she'd ever felt, her emotional fortress in ruins once more, Alice struggled to decide what to do next. Mother had told her countless times that she was meant for great things. That one day she would meet an incredible destiny and her voice, her singing, would hold the key to a new age. The rest of the family believed that, but Alice had always doubted.

Until today, when she had sung to and had heard the words of a god.



# VENUS

SOLITUDE, DEATH, AND DARKNESS.

The three fears of Venus McKenzie.

The subway tunnel the young girl was sneaking through felt more hollow and more foreign than it should have. Venus kept looking up at the ceiling, a reminder of the sleeping city just a few feet above.

Though she hated it, Venus could handle the solitude. She'd been raised an only child. In fact, often she chose solitude. It had been her decision to come to Montreal on her own and not involve her friends. Though, now that she marched blindly down the tunnel, she did long for some companionship.

She still feared the loneliness, but patting the cell phone in her pocket, Venus was reminded that her friends weren't really that far. She could, with one call, retreat back to humanity and find Penny and Abraham waiting there.

Her relationship with death was a longer and more complex affair. Where other children were afraid of corpses, she had been fascinated by them from a young age. She thought, in fact, that she would follow the path of her uncle Dr. Randy McKenzie, who was a medical examiner. But living in Saint-Ferdinand had taught her what death really was. It was one thing to poke and prod at a stranger's deceased form, a subject rather than an individual, but quite another

to live for years among people who would routinely vanish without a trace. Not to mention the frequent news of mutilated remains discovered in the woods, an occurrence that repeated two or three times each year. One day she'd be buying candy from Cindy at the corner store, and a week later Cindy's parents were burying her in the local cemetery. It was different when the dead had a name and a face.

Then there was the time she'd danced with a god of hate and death. This, too, had left its mark.

Death had announced its presence at the Laurier station through the vilest of means. It had reached out to her, pungent tendrils of decay that snaked through the air, undetected by most but unmistakable to Venus. Saint-Ferdinand had taught her the aroma of a decomposing corpse. And the Laurier station smelled of home.

That left only the darkness.

The darkness, she simply couldn't stand. It was just another word for *shadow*, and that was something Venus had had quite enough of lately.

A shadow was supposed to be nothing more than the absence of light. But it was more than that: it was where things could hide. All manner of things. The ones that existed just on the edge of life and death, or somewhere beyond it. She'd known a being of shadow, a creature of pure darkness. It had ruined her life, gouging out part of her soul in the process. Besides, darkness amplified everything else. It made the solitude that much more isolating. It sharpened her other senses, accentuating the thick smell of death. Her hearing was also keener, letting her know exactly how quiet and lonely the tunnels were at this time.

Solitude, death, and darkness. Those were the things going through Venus McKenzie's mind when she tripped over the supine body of Sylvain Gauthier.

Her own cry of surprise echoed back to her from the concrete and stone walls of the tunnel. The high-pitched scream went down an octave with each repetition before eventually dissipating in the dark.

With a bit of luck and an embarrassing stumble, Venus managed to keep her balance and avoid falling flat on her face. She was walking near the cold, moist wall, staying clear of the rails. Her boots were disturbing puddles of stagnant water that reeked of decay and garbage, but while no sweet-smelling rose herself, she could do without being covered in muddy rainwater and rat piss.

Despite the darkness, there was no mistaking the corpse. The smell alone was quite enough to confirm it. The lump that had nearly sent her sprawling to the ground had to be Sylvain Gauthier. The stench was beyond belief, answering the question of how it had traveled so far down the subway line as to be detectable all the way back at the Laurier station. How had no one reported it? Why had the maintenance crew not stumbled upon it yet?

Their negligence was her good fortune.

Gauthier had looked something like her uncle: a little pudgy, with an easy, if pained, smile, and hair everywhere but on top of a shiny scalp. What had attracted Venus's attention to him wasn't so much his appearance but rather a handful of words tucked away in the article that had reported his disappearance.

*Member of the Church of the Sandmen.*

There had been a small cult of people calling themselves "Sandmen" in Saint-Ferdinand. While Venus knew very little about them, she had no doubt about a connection.

After weeks of nearly fruitless research and investigation, with nary a clue to latch on to, the forgettable article in the *Montreal Gazette* had breathed new life into Venus's mission. Still, it would have been preferable that Gauthier still had breath of his own.

Like a flare of burning magnesium, light exploded at her fingertips. Venus's phone, for all its faults, had a decent enough flashlight, though the damn thing would drain the battery so fast, it might have been a race.

The *Gazette* article had stood out because of the unusual circumstances of Gauthier's disappearance. By all accounts, he'd been inadvertently pushed in front of an oncoming subway train. An unusual delay in the schedule had caused a sizeable number of would-be

passengers to accumulate on the platform, waiting for the next train. Some sort of commotion had occurred just as the subway emerged from the tunnel and, according to witnesses, there was a thud and a screeching of brakes as the train stopped suddenly.

Yet, despite hundreds of people present, some standing just a few feet from Gauthier at the moment of impact, the victim had completely vanished.

The Montreal police assumed the accident hadn't been that bad and that Sylvain Gauthier must have walked away, vanishing into the crowd, preferring not to draw attention to himself.

Already, that part of the story didn't ring quite true to Venus.

When she was about twelve, a few months before she and her parents moved to Saint-Ferdinand, the McKenzies had been on a trip to Montreal, enjoying the many festivals that took place downtown in the summer. On the subway ride home, just before transferring from the green to the yellow line that would take them to Longueuil, their train had come to a sudden halt.

After a lengthy pause, passengers were finally allowed off. The train had hit someone, a woman who'd leaned too far over the tracks. Her body had been lying on the ground, a single transit cop directing people away from her.

It didn't prevent Venus from looking. The victim's face seemed almost intact. Everything still in the right place. Her skin, however, was the color of crushed Lac Saint-Jean blueberries, a red tint at the edge of the bruising. She was lying on her side, arms in an uncomfortable but still not unnatural position. She might have been unconscious, or just wounded, if not for her eyes. Open and glassy, they seemed to be stuck on the verge of crying. Her face was frozen in a final, aborted expression of distress.

Whatever had happened to Gauthier, Venus knew he hadn't simply walked it off.

The article was quick to confirm it. Family and friends had reported him missing and now, through the media and a forgettable few paragraphs, authorities were calling on the public to report any sightings of a wounded, possibly disoriented man.

The flashlight on her phone cut through the darkness. A bright circle of illumination poured onto Gauthier's corpse. He looked identical to what Venus had expected, down to his brown jacket and striped fuchsia tie. The beam of light stopped on Gauthier's bloated face, giving Venus the final confirmation that she was on the right track.

Someone had gouged out his eyes.

The retching came suddenly. The vomit followed fast and unstoppable. One moment, Venus was looking down at the white glare blowing out the gray skin and crimson wounds, a portrait of roses upon snow; the next moment all the contents of her stomach erupted forth from her mouth. The muscles of her lower abdomen spasmed and her throat burned from the bile and stomach acid.

Why, she wondered, spitting out the dribble of half-digested food, would her stomach turn on her now? Had she not grown a thick enough skin to endure this sort of thing?

After all, she'd been witness to the execution of Nathan Cicero at the Saint-Ferdinand Circus Massacre. She'd seen Inspector Stephen Crowley gun down half a dozen performers and stage hands before being stabbed in the neck by his own son. She'd seen his body dissolve, consumed by shadows like a voracious swarm of beetles.

The aroma of decay, thick and wet like garbage on a hot summer day, combined with the gruesome bloated cheeks and lifeless skin, all adorned with the red buds of absent eyes replaced by writhing white maggots, had somehow pushed her over the edge.

*My stomach is a traitor*, she thought.

Gathering her wits, Venus tried to get a better look at the body and its surroundings. She'd want to take pictures, go through his pockets, and try to better understand who he was and what connection he'd had with this so-called Church of the Sandmen.

And the man she suspected of hunting its members down.

But every time she looked up, Venus would feel her insides again turn upon themselves. The floodgates were open now. The smell of

her own vomit, mixed with the pungent stench of Gauthier's decomposing remains and postmortem bowel movement, made breathing difficult.

"Get it together, Venus."

Her name came back to her, hollow after bouncing on the cold walls, but it brought no comfort, only highlighting her solitude.

Gauthier, her only companion, lay silently at her feet, and with every moment he was becoming more difficult to ignore.

Upon pushing the home button on her phone to turn the light back on, Venus was met with the bright smile of two young girls on a sunny afternoon. Both were making silly faces as one extended her arm to take the picture. Venus's gray-green eyes were full of life in a way they hadn't been for a while now, Penny's a deep cerulean that would make the sky jealous.

Venus's fingers traced the few quick motions it took to unlock the phone, navigate to Penny's contact info, and call her.

"Finally come to your senses?" Penny's groggy voice answered, eschewing all preambles.

It had been their arrangement, Venus's safety net while she was in Montreal. If ever she felt in too much danger or threatened, got sick of it or scared, or any number of other situations they had discussed, all Venus had to do was call Penelope and her friend would race to Montreal to retrieve her.

"Not quite." The timid words echoed across the tunnel.

"Veen? It's three a.m. on a weeknight. I'm driving to Montreal. If it's not to pick you up, it's to kick your ass."

"I'm sorry, okay? I need someone to talk to, and you're the only person who gets why I'm even here."

Penny let out a long sigh. It wasn't yet capitulation, but they were on their way.

"Wrong, Veen. I don't get why you're there."

Venus took a deep breath, both to collect herself and to deliver her explanation in its entirety. Nerves were getting the better of her, forcing the words out faster than she'd intended.

“I don’t know what else to do? That thing from my shed wiped out my—our—families! The only way I’m keeping it together is focusing on stopping that monster, and I need Peña to do that.”

Lucien Peña.

It was one of the names Venus had picked out of her grandfather’s notes. The name that came up the most. Peña had traveled with Neil McKenzie, explored the world with him, gathered knowledge at his side. If anyone knew about the monster from Saint-Ferdinand, it would be him.

“He won’t let me get close enough, but at the same time, he’s always lurking nearby, like he’s hovering over my shoulder. But I think he’s changed his pattern.”

“What do you mean ‘lurking’? You mean you’re being stalked by a giant magic hobo and I’m supposed to just brush that off?”

“He’s not exactly stalking me,” Venus said. “But whenever things are getting dicey, he’ll turn up somehow. Like last week, some real creeper was tailing me for a couple of nights, always hanging outside the hostel and giving me really gross looks. But then the guy completely vanishes and next thing I know, I’m talking to this other girl he’d been harassing and she said the guy got the shit beat out of him by”—her friend’s words repeated in her mind—“a ‘giant magic hobo,’ as you put it.”

Another deep sigh came over the line, interrupted by the terrible connection.

“Six foot five, probably knows some of the same hocus-pocus as your uncle. What else would you call him? And if that story was meant to make me feel better, it was a complete failure,” said Penny.

“I’m just saying, the guy is like some sort of guardian angel to homeless kids.”

“Right, a regular superhero, and you’ve got him figured out.”

“I do! There’s been a series of accidents. Weird things that pop up in newspapers about people disappearing and then being found dead a few days later. Get this: every one of these people belong to a so-called ‘Church of the Sandmen,’ and it all started right after the

circus massacre. I've tracked down the last victim: Sylvain Gauthier. Some big-shot lawyer."

Venus could hear the sounds of mugs being moved around, a cupboard slamming shut, and coffee percolating on Penelope's end. "All right," Penny said, tired but sincere. "Where's this guy's body now? Did you already call the cops?"

"He's right here. At my feet. Unless he ran away, which I really hope he didn't. I'm not equipped to handle the undead right now."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I mean, emotionally."

"No. I mean, you're with the body right now? Like, as we speak?"

"Yeah. That's why I'm calling. I don't know what to do next. Or rather, I know exactly what I'm supposed to do, but I can't bring myself to do it."

"Oh my god. Venus. Call the freakin' cops! What are you thinking?"

"I'm not calling the cops! I don't want to spook Peña just as I'm getting close to him. Besides, how well did the police getting involved work out at Cicero's Circus?"

Lucien Peña had vanished from society, erasing as much of himself as he could in the process. The only clue they'd found about his whereabouts was an article dating back fifteen years, deep in the online archives of the *Montreal Gazette*. Peña, described as a disgraced professor of anthropology and archeology, had attacked an unidentified man in a fast-food restaurant. Witnesses had described him as "rabid" and "unhinged." He was never apprehended, nor had he been heard from since.

"Speaking of cops," Venus continued, procrastinating. "Any news from Daniel?"

"What? No! And who cares?" Penny said. "You called me because you didn't know what to do? Well, I'm telling you. Call. The. Cops. Please."

"Fine. I just need to do something first."

It wasn't so much that she'd found her lost courage. The thought of looking at maggots crawling out of a dead man's eye sockets still



made her empty stomach do acrobatics. But if there was one force in the universe that could silence even that level of revulsion in Venus McKenzie, it was curiosity.

Missing eyes were not a foreign concept to a resident of Saint-Ferdinand. They had been the calling card of Sam Finnegan, the Saint-Ferdinand Killer. Now it appeared to Venus as a signature from Peña.

“Venus?” Penny called out. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t want to leave empty-handed.”

With a deep breath to brace herself, Venus plunged her hand into the dead man’s pants pocket, hoping to find a wallet. The fabric was cool to the touch and a little damp. All she pulled out was a set of keys that included a fob adorned with the BMW logo.

Carefully leaning over the body, trying to touch it as little as possible, Venus put her phone on the ground so she could use both hands. The light from the screen projected upward. Cables and tubes running the length of the tunnel stretched up into inky black shapes. Before she could search Gauthier’s other pocket, however, Venus noticed another dark shape. Red and irregular, it seemed pulled from beneath the body. Clumsy brushstrokes of burgundy and brown traced the concrete in front of her. If there was any doubt that Lucien Peña was sending a message, it was obliterated by what she saw.

A sideways football drawn using the blood of the victim, but with a smudged spiral in the middle. Like an eye.

“Venus? Veen?” Penny’s weak voice came in and out on the speaker of the phone. “What’s going on?”

Venus ignored the phone, reaching out instead with a trembling hand, intent on tracing the pattern of gore on the wall. Images from the murals in her backyard shed flooded back in a traumatic torrent. The more she tried to blink them away, the more persistent they became.

Spirals within spirals of a convoluted design, framing a crude image of an eye. The mural of coagulated blood wasn’t identical to the one that had been drawn on the walls of her backyard shed, but

it was similar enough. This design would have been one of the last things her father had seen before he was killed by the god.

The moist walls had not permitted the blood from drying out completely, so it remained wet to the touch. Venus's stomach wanted to do another somersault but was instead gripped with cold dread. Memories of that summer were as palpable as the blood sticking to her finger, and she could almost feel the god's presence in the nearby shadows.

"Hey!" a woman's voice called out from deeper in the tunnel, accompanied by a bright light. This wasn't subway security. The voice carried with it the weight of genuine authority.

"Penny," Venus said, picking up her phone. "I don't think I'm going to need to call the cops after all."

# ABRAHAM

THE CRACKS WERE like a spider's web. Thin and white, they radiated from a central point of impact. Each spoke on the wheel was randomly connected by other fissures along their length. Tiny shards had fallen off since he'd first dropped the phone a little over a week ago.

Fortunately, the damage hadn't affected the device's functionality. Abraham could still make calls, listen to music, and play the occasional game. Even through his thick, calloused skin, he could feel the texture of the cracks when he swiped over them. It bothered him. The pattern of his fingertips would map out the creases in the glass, reminding him that this new toy, already damaged, was either too fragile or that he was too much of a clumsy oaf. Knowing his luck, it would fail him when he needed it most.

With a heavy sigh, he tossed the device onto the kitchen table, half hoping it would fall apart on impact. The little piece of technological wonder was an anachronism at the Peterson farm. Right now it lay motionless next to an empty cereal bowl that was older than Abraham, on a wooden table made by Petersons three generations ago. Even the silverware, though not fancy, was an antiquity. Abraham could imagine the spoon in his bowl had once been a gleaming, polished utensil. Now, after decades of scratching against dishes and teeth and brushes, it was a pale, flat metallic gray.

Abraham shifted his heavy frame, the chair and floor responding with a chorus of creaking wood. The farmhouse itself was also ancient. Thick, sturdy hardwood floors ran throughout most rooms. They had been refinished now and again, but they still hinted at the house's history. There was a dark spot on the kitchen floor where water had seeped into the grain. A few boards had been changed in the living room, so the color of the wood didn't match the rest of the original floor.

It gave the Peterson home character.

With a grunt, Abraham got to his feet, laboriously pushing on the table with his hands. He was a large boy for his age, over six feet two inches tall, with hair the color of a maple tree's trunk, brown but dull. His eyes were a little too close together on his large face and he tended to slouch to hide his height. On his best days, he gave off the air of a gentle giant, powerful and well-meaning.

Looking around, he observed how all the cabinets in the kitchen were wide open again. They'd been doing this for a while now. The first time Abraham had noticed was a few days after the massacre. He'd been too busy to give it much thought back then, with all the coming and going and answering questions from cops. By the time things had calmed down, he'd all but gotten used to the random doors creeping open and slamming shut. For a while he'd worried it was his father, the cancer finally eating at his mind.

Strange though it might have been, it was a relief to one night see half a dozen cabinet doors yawn open in front of him while knowing his father was sleeping on the living room couch. Whatever the cause, it had nothing to do with Harry or the slow progression of his illness. In Abraham's mind, that left two possibilities: the house was settling, or there were ghosts. Sighing again, Abraham picked up a stack of papers from the table. This was Saint-Ferdinand: as long as they limited their activities to the kitchen, the ghosts could wait.

Abraham thumbed a quick text message on the phone to let Penelope know he was on his way.

There was a shortcut to Penny's place he used to take, through the fields and part of the forest. But he had neglected to take care of the grounds all summer. Fertile soil had gone unchecked, and now the whole area—from the farmhouse to the edge of the forest—was overgrown with weeds. Abraham just couldn't bring himself to step onto that part of the land. A scant couple of months earlier it had been a killing field, the site of the now notorious Saint-Ferdinand Circus Massacre. Ultimately, seven people had lost their lives after Inspector Crowley, the local chief of police, had gone on a shooting spree.

Walking to Penny's house would take him up Main Street. Though the trek would take over half an hour, Abraham didn't expect to see a single car, perhaps not even another human being.

The Richards farm was the first property Abraham walked by. The photo of a middle-aged woman's face looked back at him from a real estate sign planted on their lawn, right next to the long driveway. The word *sold* had been added atop. There were many signs like it all over town. Though few were crowned with the appended *sold*, most of the owners had already left.

The sun was bright, the sky marred by only a few wispy clouds, but Main Street still felt like it was in twilight. Abraham wasn't greeted by the smell of burgers and grease from the fast-food joint near the gas station. The restaurant, his favorite, had closed its doors for good. It wasn't the only one. As he crossed the street, Abraham could see all the way to the other end of the village. Some stores, like the flower shop, had their windows boarded up; others had signs pasted to their windows declaring that they were now closed for business. Only the grocery and convenience stores were still open, though at this hour, they remained deserted.

Abraham tripped over a pothole, his attention taken up by an effort to remember how Saint-Ferdinand had once been. The village had been many things while he'd grown up there. Bright and lively during the day, forbidding and scary as the sun went down, but one thing it had never been was depressing.

It all made Penelope's home stand out when he got there.

Penny had inherited the house from her mother and had since kept it in impeccable condition. The dark blue wood paneling and white window frames were freshly cleaned and radiant under the bright sun. Her lawn had been raked of the first few autumn leaves, and the cobblestones that led to her front door were swept. Even though the other houses in the neighborhood had been abandoned for only a couple of weeks, their FOR SALE signs a statement to that effect, they all seemed derelict compared to Penny's property.

It made Abraham feel guilty about neglecting his father's farm.

"Anything to avoid talking about ghosts," he said to himself, pressing the doorbell.

"Coffee?"

Penny had aged.

They all had over the summer. However, where events had taken their toll on Abraham throughout the aftermath of Saint-Ferdinand's demise, Penelope had suffered the worst of it—right from the onset, when her mother had been found dead, ripped to pieces in the woods. The aftershocks of the initial tragedy had left cracks in her personality. She'd become more private and deliberate, but also quieter, retreating to a position of observer. Having already lost her father five years prior, Penny was now alone. What could possibly compare to that?

"So, what should I do?" he asked, flipping through his stack of papers.

"What do you *want* to do?"

Penelope busied herself in the kitchen, having left Abraham at the dining room table with his papers and a slice of pecan pie. He'd come seeking her help in filling out college applications. Penelope had already gone through the process herself but had also navigated the legal labyrinth necessary to keep her mother's house. School applications must have been a cakewalk.

Abraham knew how difficult a decision it was for Penny, to keep the house. This was where she'd grown up and it was where she and

her mother had mourned her father's passing. There were a lot of memories here for her, but how did you decide if the good ones outweighed the bad? There was no metric for this sort of thing, and Penny was someone who loved metrics.

"I want to be done with all this paperwork," he answered after a moment.

"No, you dummy," Penny said, walking back in while the coffee percolated in the kitchen. "Long term. What do you want to do in five years? Ten?"

Abraham ignored the jab. This was how Penny talked to him. Instead he poked at the piece of pie with his fork, focusing his attention across the kitchen and into the adjoining living room.

Penny had redecorated over the last few months. He'd helped her install some of the shelves on the wall and build a bookshelf and a coffee table. It was her way of moving forward while staying in what had been her family's home.

On the couch, he could see a lump of gray fur. It looked like a stuffed animal, but Abraham knew better. Underneath the cheap faux fur was Venus's cat, Sherbet. Or whatever creature it had become. The girls insisted it was harmless, that they should keep it, and Abraham went along with the idea, even though the thing made his skin crawl.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I need to stay close so I can take care of Dad. I used to think I'd be working on the farm, but now . . ." But now there wasn't going to be a farm for much longer. In fact, the Peterson legacy was coming to an end, with Saint-Ferdinand gasping its last breath and his father right along with it.

Abraham needed to figure out what he was going to do once everything he knew and loved had slipped through his fingers.

"Permission to be honest?" Penelope asked, taking the papers away from him.

"Granted."

"How long do you think your dad's got?"

"Pardon?"

She had asked to be candid and he'd known Penelope to be direct with him. She knew how sensitive he was about his father's health but had never been one to bring it up. "Your dad's dying and the farm is falling apart. Fine. That's terrible. I get it. But you can't keep building your life around him."

"What the hell, Penny?" he said, turning in his chair, outraged. "That's a shitty question!"

She didn't cut him off. She didn't have to. A simple index finger pointed at his face was all that was required.

The two of them stood in silence, the coffee machine dripping and gurgling from the kitchen.

Abraham looked from Penny's hand, all the way up her arm and into her pained crystal-blue eyes.

There he sat in her kitchen, pestering her for advice, complaining about his ailing father. Meanwhile, Penelope had been dealing with the death of her mother and finding herself an orphan at a time when she needed the same kind of guidance he expected from her.

It was indeed unfair, but not toward him.

His father was dying, but Harry Peterson had been dying for years and might still have weeks, months, or more ahead of him. As painful as the slow demise might be, father and son had prepared for it and enjoyed each other's company and said whatever needed saying. Twice so far, Penny had been denied that luxury.

"I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head.

"Eat your pie."

Her voice did not reflect the look she'd given him. It was calm and measured but also sweet.

Penelope walked back into the kitchen. Abraham could hear the sound of dishes clinking.

*One sugar and a drop of milk*, Abraham thought. *That's what she likes in her coffee.*

When she walked to the table, the tension of their exchange had washed off. She placed a steaming mug in front of him, next to his pie. She also knew what he preferred in *his* coffee, though he suspected it wouldn't be as sweet as he'd have made it himself.



Abraham looked up and smiled at her and she smiled back. It was exactly the kind of little moment he liked to savor when the two of them hung out together, but as always, something had to spoil it.

A report echoed across the room, startling them both.

It was the familiar clap of wood upon wood, immediately accompanied by a chime of rattling dishes. Penny's shoulders tensed, the jolt of her arms making her spill coffee all over Abraham's papers.

"What was that?" he asked, hoping she'd know the answer.

Penny didn't reply, putting down her mug with a quivering hand and looking slowly over her shoulder.

She didn't know.

It was happening here, too. Whatever was opening cupboards and cabinets back at the farm was doing the same in Penelope's kitchen.

After weeks of forcing himself not to think about it, all the possibilities that had been lurking at the back of Abraham's mind came flooding in.

He'd assumed these were the ghosts of the people killed at the farm. But if so, why were they also at Penny's? Was it something to do with him? Maybe it was something much more dangerous, like the creature Venus had kept in her backyard shed during the summer. The one Penny had tried to kill.

"You think it's that thing?" he asked, hoping she'd at least be able to confirm it wasn't.

"It's been going on for a few days now. Freaked the hell out of me the first time. Sherbet didn't seem bothered, so I figured it couldn't be that bad. But it keeps happening. That, or I'll take a shower and when I come out all my stuff has been moved. I'll find my toothbrush on the kitchen counter or ice trays piled up on a coffee table. It's maddening."

She sponged at his papers with a dish towel, trying uselessly to salvage them from the spilled coffee. Abraham recognized it for what it was—busywork to avoid a busy mind.

"It's happening at the farm, too," he said.

The frantic cleanup stopped as Penny froze in place. When she turned around, it was no longer worry and concern that painted her face but irritation, not unlike that of a parent facing a stubborn child.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I was going to. But I didn’t want to upset you. It’s not the strangest thing to happen in Saint-Ferdinand, so I figured it could wait. Besides, you didn’t tell me either.”

She frowned, throwing the towel over her shoulder and then crossing her arms.

“Fair enough. I know you’re not a fan of Sherbet and I didn’t want to upset you. What did your father have to say about this?”

“My dad?”

“Yeah, your dad. Are you telling me you didn’t mention this?”

“That his house is haunted? He’d never believe me and would probably think I’ve lost my mind. He’s fragile enough as it—”

“He’s lived in Saint-Ferdinand his whole life. He knew about Crowley and this so-called god. He’s not going to die over a ghost opening cupboards.”

“How are you acting like this is nothing?” he said, agitated. “After the last scare, the doctors said he should avoid any kind of stress. I’m terrified just watching him go up and down the stairs on his own, and you want me to just walk up to him and say ‘Oh, Dad? We have spirits in the kitchen. No big deal.’”

“You’re worried about that stupid prophecy, aren’t you?” Penny frowned.

“Ezekiel said that Dad would die in Saint-Ferdinand and that things that die here don’t rest easy. Both of our houses are haunted. Hell, the whole town is probably haunted!”

“Prophecies aren’t real, Abe.”

“Neither are ghosts or gods or undead little monsters in fur coats!”

“Don’t drag the cat into this.”

“That,” he said, pointing at Sherbet, “is not a cat, Penny. Not anymore.”

“Leave Sherbet alone. He’s been through enough.” Penny paused, seeming to try to compose herself by pinching the bridge of her nose. “Please, talk to your father. He can help us.”

Abraham got up from the table and walked back to the front door. Part of him wanted to end the conversation. It made him feel uncomfortable. His father’s health had been hanging over his head for years, but never had the thread that held that particular sword ever seemed so thin.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Penny asked as he pulled his shoes on.

“Home. And I think you should come with.”

For a moment he hoped she would agree, but Penny didn’t budge, crossing her arms again instead.

“Why would I do that?”

“So I can protect you.”

“I’m no more in danger here than I would be at the farm. What are you going to do if the hauntings become violent? Punch a ghost?”

It sounded silly when she said it like that, but she was right. What could he do to protect her, or himself and his dad, if things changed? If whatever forces were opening cupboards and moving dishes decided to throw knives instead, there was little in his power to stop them.

“I’ll go if we talk to your dad,” Penny added. “And I need to bring Sherbet. I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“Leave the cat and we can talk about my dad on the way.”

For a moment Penny did seem to ponder the option. Leaving Sherbet shouldn’t be a deal breaker, as he wasn’t even technically alive.

“Go home, Abe. Talk to your dad. I’ll be fine here.”

### *Stupid.*

The temperature had dropped since his walk earlier in the day. Fresh puddles of water gave testimony that a cold front had pushed through the area and brought quick showers while he was busy damaging his friendship with Penny.

In the end, they'd accomplished nothing of what he'd set out to do. He was no closer to figuring out what to do with his life, had filled out none of his applications, and, to punctuate the failure, had left all of his paperwork at Penny's.

None of that mattered. He'd left Penelope behind, and that felt like the biggest failure. What if the phenomenon wasn't ghosts? After all, they'd never found out what had happened to the monster after it'd escaped Venus's shed. Perhaps this was a way for it to manifest. Then what? Would it strike at his father, Penny, and finally him?

But Penelope was right. What could he do about it? She'd stabbed the beast with a knife and it'd had no effect. Abraham couldn't punch a god any more than he could a ghost. It didn't make leaving his friend behind feel any better, though.

Abraham turned to give Penny's house one last look, perhaps catch a glimpse of her in the window. Maybe even see her step out, having reconsidered.

Instead all he saw were the blue walls of the house catching beams of sunlight that snuck in between clouds. Distracted, he stepped in a puddle of rainwater.

Normally, he wouldn't care so much, as he'd be wearing thick, steel-toed, waterproof boots. However, he'd worn his good sneakers. Muddy work boots wouldn't have cut it when visiting Penny.

*Who am I kidding?*

It was pointless. Even if he did wear the right shoes, he'd neglect to shave. If he got the grooming and the footwear right, he'd forget to change and show up smelling of sweat and fertilizer.

By the time he'd gotten home and peeled the sock off his wet foot, his calloused skin was wrinkled and moist. Not to mention the odor.

"That you, Abe?" a tired voice called from the living room.

"Nope," Abraham answered, trying to put a smile in his voice.

The answer that came sucked any sliver of joy right out of him. A wet cough with a life all its own, like something was inhabiting Harry Peterson's lungs and fighting to get out. It was too loud and

lasted too long; when it did subside, it was followed by a rattling sigh of both relief and submission.

“Funny guy,” Harry said, as if he hadn’t been spitting out his life into a handkerchief a second earlier.

“Just got back from Penny’s,” Abe said, sitting down on the couch across from his old man’s favorite armchair.

“Figured.”

“Still don’t know what I’m going to apply for.”

Abraham considered bringing up his fallout with Penelope. However, much like discussing the kitchen cabinets, he worried it would put undue stress on the old man. Looking at him now in the glow of the television screen, he saw every line and every crevice in his gaunt face. He was a blue wraith whose luminescence shifted along with the programming on-screen.

“Didn’t you mention cooking school at some point? You’re pretty good in the kitchen. Do better than your mother. Bless her soul, she was an angel, but she couldn’t even handle the microwave.”

Abraham chuckled. Aside from his appearance, Harry seemed well. There was a tank of oxygen on a small cart that followed him everywhere, with tubes going up his nose, but the stubborn old man refused to let it slow him down.

He spent the lion’s share of his time in his studio. Abraham always worried that the smell of oils and the fumes from the turpentine would aggravate his health, but he couldn’t bring himself to do anything about it. Painting was all that Harry Peterson had left aside from his son and his pride. Taking him out of his studio would lose him two, perhaps all three, if he was resentful enough.

Besides, he had a project—one last painting, he said. He’d claim vociferously that this time, after decades of practice, he’d get it right. This time, it would be perfect.

“Done for the day?” Abraham asked, trying to kick off his remaining shoe.

“Yeah. Eyes are getting blurry. One bad brushstroke and I could be set back for a couple of days. Painting’s like a woman: best to take it slow and easy.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Bah.”

“Eat anything?” Abraham asked.

“Nah. Waiting for my son the cordon bleu to get home. Have him fix me a gourmet meal.”

“Steak-and-cheese sandwich fancy enough for you?”

“Depends if I get a beer with it. A fancy beer.”

There had been a time when Harry’s doctors would have frowned at the idea of anything but the most sensible food and drink for their patient. Alcohol was certainly out of the question with the potent cocktail of medication that was already on the menu. However, at this point, they’d all agreed there was nothing to gain by depriving a man knocking at death’s door the last few pleasures he could get.

Every night, Abraham fixed what he feared would be his father’s last meal and brought him his painkillers, though they seemed to have little effect.

They did have fancy beer, though. While not basking in riches, the Peterson household could still afford a few luxuries. In this case, a few bottles of Chimay always stocked the refrigerator.

They ate in silence while watching a few sitcoms on television. It was good. A reminder of the old days, days soon to be irrevocably past.

Abraham wanted to strike up a conversation, to follow Penelope’s suggestion and dig into his father’s knowledge. But then he’d catch Harry looking at him. He’d look at the old, squinting eyes burrowed deep in their sockets and framed by crow’s feet, and he found pride in them.

What was he supposed to do? He could bring up the cabinets or ask about ghosts, but his father already looked like he had one foot in the grave. Abraham was terrified he’d be pushing him the rest of the way.

Eventually Harry fell asleep. Simply staying alive was a chore for the man. Walking to and from the studio with his oxygen tank took as much out of him as a marathon would have in his youth.

Abraham picked up the dishes, taking them to the kitchen, intent on washing them before going to bed himself. Flipping on the light switch with his free hand, his stomach sank.

Not only were the cupboards open, but every single dish, bowl, pot, and glass had been stacked on the dinner table. Neither Abraham nor his father had heard a thing, and no one had turned the lights on in the kitchen—they would have noticed from the living room.

Abraham put the dirty dishes in the sink. He'd have to put everything back. Eyes shut and head hanging from his shoulders, he could feel the full weight of the situation pushing down on him. How much longer before it broke him?

After a minute, Abraham realized he'd been gripping the edge of the sink with so much force that his knuckles hurt. It was a lot to accept for him, but he had to face facts: he was afraid. He was afraid for his dad and for Penny, but also for himself.

Looking up from the dishes and through the kitchen window, looking for his courage in the neglected fields or the outline of the barn, Abraham noticed something.

The lights in Harry Peterson's studio were on.

Either they'd been left on by accident, or Abraham had a new explanation for the cabinets. Maybe it wasn't ghosts or an ancient vengeful god. Maybe it was just a squatter with a strange sense of humor.

Harry's studio was built into the second floor of the barn. The Peterson farm hadn't raised animals in over a decade, so the bottom floor had been converted into a makeshift garage with an immense room above, one filled with dozens of easels and hundreds of canvases. The ceiling was covered with professional-quality lighting that shone upon the room like the midday sun.

He walked between the paintings. Harry had reverently covered each of them with a white linen sheet. It was tempting to peek under a few and see what wonders his father had created, but either respect or a stranger fear kept his curiosity in check. Harry Peterson's paintings were no ordinary works of art.

“Hello?” Abraham called out, listening for any sound of an intruder. There was nothing but his own echo. No shadows moving between easels or sheets rustling as someone hid behind them. A quick walk-through of the studio confirmed that he was the only one there. Him and the giant canvas his father had been toiling over since returning from the hospital.

A staggering eight feet high and easily five feet wide, it, too, was covered by linen, but this time it was the striped fabric of a bedsheet. And even that was insufficient to cover the full height.

A new thought crossed Abraham’s mind.

Harry Peterson had once explained to his son that the paintings he made, or attempted to make, were meant to blur the lines of reality. So far he’d only been able to paint birds that came alive within the confines of the canvas. What if he was attempting to push further? What if Harry Peterson’s current masterpiece was meant for more?

With a flourish, Abraham removed the sheet, exposing the immense canvas and the work that was consuming so much of his father’s remaining days.

Considering what he knew of his father’s paintings, he had expected something else. Something more . . .

*Alive.*

An animal or perhaps a whole menagerie of creatures. Something that might explain the strange things going on in his and Penny’s kitchens.

Instead it was a gate. A stone archway built of oil and pigment, but it looked almost real enough to step through.

The landscape beyond was like nothing he’d ever seen. There were rough stones and patches of low grass that swayed in the wind. Lichen covered every rock, and just before the horizon was a turbulent ocean, dark and gray with only the occasional whitecap to break its monotony.

Something bothered Abraham about the archway, but it took a moment for him to figure out what. The gate was covered with a particular pattern, a spiral of lines with the complexity of a rosebush.



These were carved in stone, highlighted by pale moss that had grown within the recesses. He'd seen this design earlier this summer. On the walls of Venus's shed. Except it wasn't chiseled into rock. The pattern had been made of bone, blood, and viscera.