

Praise for *The Space Between*

“In this beautifully crafted and haunting tale of love, murder, and the surreal machinations of fate and time, Erik Tomblin again shows that he's a force to be reckoned with. Few writers can handle this genre as masterfully as he does. *The Space Between* will keep you riveted, surprise you, shock you, and, as happened to me, will very probably make you want to reread it immediately after turning the last page. It is an exquisite and compelling read.”

T. M. Wright
Author of *Cold House*
& *A Manhattan Ghost Story*

“*The Space Between* is sublime. An absolutely fabulous story by an amazing talent.”

James A. Moore
author of *Blood Red*
& the *Serenity Falls* trilogy

Praise for *Riverside Blues*
(Earthling Publications)

“...Erik Tomblin has created one of the most quietly disturbing supernatural tales I've read in some time.”

Don D'Amassa
Author of *Narcissus*
& *Dead of Winter*

“Erik Tomblin has written a story that defies conventional description. One part ghost story, one part love story, and one part tale of deceit and revenge, *Riverside Blues* is a well written and compelling novella worthy of anyone's time.”

Scott A. Johnson
Author of *Cane River*
& *An American Haunting*

"In RIVERSIDE BLUES, Erik Tomblin attempts something highly audacious and succeeds, telling a chilling and bittersweet story of lost love regained. It's a unique and atmospheric blend of horror, mystery, and Southern Gothic, with an ending that fulfills my definition of perfection -- surprising yet inevitable. A dark and deeply felt gem from a writer well worth watching."

Chet Williamson
Author of *Second Chance*
& *The Story of Noichi the Blind*

"I've been looking for this book since I first discovered horror. A masterpiece in its own right, this story will haunt you long after you've put it down. Five out of five stars."

Horror-Web

The Space Between

A Novel

Erik Tomblin



The Space Between
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The Space Between

One

The cheers from the crowd pushed at his back and he practically stumbled into his dressing room. The second encore had been unplanned, and as Isaac Owens sat down with his guitar under a single spotlight for the last song of the last show of the tour, an expectant silence fell upon the audience like a spell. Even the occasional yell from an enthusiastic fan seemed muffled, and soon he could only hear the hum of the monitor in front of him. The beat of his heart vibrated through the body of his guitar, thrumming against his palm as it rested on the strings.

He played the song he'd written for Emily over a year ago; a song he'd only played once, just for her. He'd not even practiced it since, but after such a perfect show he was sure the crowd would allow him a mistake or two. He'd played it perfectly, however, and even when he choked up on the lyrics, the hitch in his voice seemed to work in syncopation with the song.

Isaac had felt the last of his energy slipping away as he neared the first chorus. The tour had been both exhilarating and exhausting, but the crowds and the experience itself had fueled him for the past four months. Seeing thousands of people standing and cheering your name, their faces pregnant with anticipation just to hear your songs was enough to make anyone feel as if he could move mountains. He'd almost come around to his old self, a self he'd not known for over a year.

But as he had stood behind the stage, soaking in the applause after the first encore and letting the realization that his dream had finally come true overcome him, Isaac felt that gray cloud roll back upon him from some hidden horizon. For so long he'd imagined Emily standing right there next to him at such a moment, pride beaming from her soft, brown eyes. Yet he stood alone and the joy of the moment was suddenly dull, lacking.

After the call for another song went on for ten minutes, he stepped back on the stage, waving away the rest of the band. He would do this one alone. It felt right, fitting. And as he pulled a stool from behind the drum riser, placing it under the lone spotlight, he felt exactly that: alone. Even the sweat that was rolling down his back seemed foreign, not a part of him. He sat on the stool, waited for the silence that was inevitable, and began the song not even his manager had heard.

Once he'd finished and the light faded to black, he went straight backstage. His manager was close behind, yelling over the crowd noise about the song, but Isaac shook his head and didn't look back. He knew he was probably coming off as the moody, eccentric musician he swore he'd never be, but he also knew that if he had to talk business at that moment, he was likely to lose it. And that would be worse.

He sat in the dressing room chair, examining the melancholy smile that occasionally touched his lips in the mirror. He should have known this feeling would catch up with him sooner or later. The tour had started quickly with the leap in album sales, and before he knew it, Isaac was traveling the country, headlining shows in all of the largest cities. Only a few months earlier he was playing in smaller venues, opening for bands and performers he grew up listening to.

Isaac knew he was headed down a road that always led to guilt, so the knock at his door was somewhat of a relief, regardless of how physically and emotionally exhausted he felt. Mick Sears, his friend and attorney, entered the room with his wife and daughter.

"Hey, Mick. Who's suing me today?"

Mick's low, rolling chuckle preceded his entry into the room. "Now is that any way to greet 'He Who Keeps the Wolves at Bay?'"

"I apologize," Isaac answered, standing and waving Mick and his family into the room. "Glad you guys could make it out tonight."

"Are you kidding?" Mick answered, nodding toward his wife and daughter. "It was either that or wake up covered in honey and lying in a bed of fire ants." His wife lightly jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. The young girl just rolled her eyes at her father and then continued beaming at Isaac.

"How are you, Sandra?" Isaac asked, stepping forward to give Mick's wife a hug. He turned to the daughter, nine year-old Michelle, and gave her a peck on the forehead. "You enjoy the show?"

The young girl blushed and nodded. "You were awesome, Ike."

"It was incredible," Sandra piped in. "Especially that last song. That was beautiful, Isaac."

"Thanks," he said, and glanced back at Mick. His friend was watching him, a hint of concern in his eyes. Mick stepped forward and clapped him on the arm.

"Okay, ladies. I have to talk a little business with Ike. Maybe after that I can convince him to come grab a bite with us at the house."

"You should, Isaac. We'd love to have you." Sandra's pleasant smile couldn't camouflage her own concern.

Isaac nodded and waved to Michelle, still beaming and blushing from his kiss. Mick closed the door behind them and stepped back to stand in front of Isaac, his eyes narrowing a bit as he looked over his tired, sweaty friend.

"How are you, Ike? Really?"

Isaac smiled and shook his head, trying to shrug off his mood.

"I'm good, Mick. Really."

"You look a little beat."

"Four months on the road can do that."

Mick seemed to consider this for only a moment before brushing it off.

"You need a break."

Isaac sat back in his chair, but said nothing. Mick moved across the room to sit on the small couch.

"I'm not saying this as your attorney, but as your friend. *You need a break.*"

"Come on, Mick. I'm just a little worn down."

His friend leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he put on his most serious look.

"How long have we known each other? Seven years, right?" Isaac nodded. "It's always been friends before business with us and always will be. That song tonight...well, I'm no fool. Don't get me wrong. It's probably one of your best. But I'm guessing you didn't play it for the fans, did you?"

Isaac remained silent.

"I didn't think so. Don't you see what you're doing to yourself by hanging on like that? Don't you see how beating yourself up over something you could do nothing about is affecting you?"

"And just how is it affecting me?" Isaac asked, unable to curb the bite of his words.

"I can't remember the last time I talked to the *real* Ike Owens. Even before the tour, it's been like talking to a zombie. You're still caught up in something you had no control over. And those last few songs you've written? Jesus, Ike, they're like doses of audio morphine."

The last comment stung, but he knew Mick was right. He hadn't been himself, even with the distraction of the tour. He'd only written three songs in the past year; only a fifth of what he was capable of. And those songs were more depressing than a bag full of Quaaludes.

"All I'm saying is take some time to get away from everything. When's the last time you went out and did something just for you? If you don't start thinking about yourself and stop thinking about her, then you better remember this night because you just peaked."

Isaac closed his eyes, knowing the anger he wanted to let loose was unjustified. His friend was right. Music was an easy distraction from life, but if you were the one creating it, your life came out in the songs. Guilt and depression could only enhance creativity for so long before you became redundant or stagnant.

After a moment, Isaac looked up at his good friend and nodded. He didn't want to speak just yet, not sure if he would be able to hold it together after such a display of true friendship and care. It was something he hadn't really allowed himself to feel in quite a while.

"Okay," Mick continued, his voice making an easy transition to a lighter tone. "We have

some quick business to discuss. Fortunately, I think it may be relevant.”

“Yeah?” Isaac was instantly curious.

“I’m not sure you’re gonna believe this,” Mick began, leaning back and resting his arms across the top of the couch. “It seems you have a secret admirer. Or did, anyway.”

“Someone send another dozen roses to your office?”

“Even better. Try a few dozen acres, out in Logan County, Georgia. It’s on the outskirts of a town called Holden.”

Moments passed with nothing but silence between the two men. Isaac, usually very perceptive when someone was trying to pull one over on him, could detect no such intention in Mick’s voice. Besides, even if it was a joke and Mick was ballsy enough to try it after the past week, it wasn’t a very funny one. Isaac could easily afford a few acres in any rural area down South. He’d already bought his sister and her family twenty acres in western Tennessee, just an hour’s drive from his apartment in

Nashville.

“You still with me, Ike?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Did I hear you right? Someone’s giving me land in Georgia?”

“Already gave, actually. It’s coming out of a trust set up over ten years ago. The small firm in charge won’t disclose who it’s from, just that it’s been held under the benefactor’s instructions to give it to you now. Forty-eight acres in Holden, Georgia, complete with a house and barn. By looking at the map of the town online, I’d say you might be lucky to have some of that new-fangled indoor plumbing to boot.”

Isaac wasn’t sure what to say. Gifts from fans were not uncommon, but this went far beyond a box of his favorite cookies or bottle of expensive wine.

“Wait,” Isaac finally spoke. “You said it was set up in a trust over ten years ago?”

“That’s right,” Mick affirmed. “Just over ten years ago.”

Isaac fell silent again, doing a quick bit of math in his head. Ten years ago he’d been only twenty-two and just released from an extended college career. His long days were spent elbow-deep in hot, soapy water at Little Piggy’s BBQ Shack in the heart of Memphis. His even longer nights were spent with his guitar in hand, strumming a few covers along with his extensive repertoire of originals, in any venue available: bars, restaurants, even street corners. It wasn’t until just three years ago, after the release of his first album, that anyone outside of those Memphis streets would have known who he was.

“I guess you see the big mystery then?” Mick asked.

“It’s kind of hard to miss,” Isaac answered, his voice soft with wonder.

“No relatives out that way?”

“In Georgia? Not that I know of. All of my mom’s family stayed in this area. My dad’s clan are all up north and probably wouldn’t be caught dead south of Ohio.”

Isaac was about to speak again when Mick continued, ending any other possible line of questioning.

“Well, Ike, I wish I could be more help. Hell, I’d like to know a little more about it myself. Maybe I can sweet-talk one of the paralegals with their firm. Other than that, you might be able to dig up some info when you go check it out.”

No response again from Isaac, who was still trying to sort through what little information he had been given.

“You’re at least going down there, right? It could be exactly the break you need. Nice country air and all that. Plus, for all you know, you could be sitting on a goldmine. And I, of course, would be more than happy to handle the sale of such a nice chunk of potentially commercial land.”

Mick’s humor brought Isaac back around. “I’m sure you would. I guess it couldn’t hurt to check it out. Can you send me an e-mail on the specifics?”

“Will do. I’ll also send you a copy of the letter from Ferguson, Davis & Rainwater, and

copies of the deed and plot. I'll send the keys as well, once I make a copy."

"Sounds good," Isaac agreed.

After a few more pleasantries (usually exchanged prior to Mick relaying *bad* news), Isaac walked Mick to the door, promising to catch up with him and his family for a late-night bite. He sat back down in the chair, staring out the small window into the thick, gray sky hanging over the Country Music Capital of the world. The sound of traffic and city life drifted up at him, but fell upon deaf ears. Mick's words kept replaying in his thoughts and his own questions rang along with them, eventually forcing Isaac to shake his head and come to a resolution.

He had two months before his presence would be required for any pressing business matters. As long as this backwoods town had phone lines, he couldn't think of a reason not to go and at least see the place. He could just as easily hire a realtor and sell the property without ever stepping foot in the town, but where was the fun in that? Emily would think him a-

There he went again, trying to include Emily in his life choices. Unavoidable, he knew, but he still scolded himself each time, even if his own opinion coincided with what he believed hers would have been. Getting away for a short while might help – he still lived in the same apartment they had shared for only three months. His sister had finally talked him into letting her "redecorate," thus removing any influence Emily had managed to have upon the dwelling in her short time there.

Still, he couldn't paint over the memories and ghosts that wandered around with him, slipping in and out of his thoughts like fog. A change of scenery without the hectic schedule of touring could be exactly what he needed before the music of his life became work again. If the place was as rural as Mick had alluded, then Isaac might actually have a chance to get back to his roots, get inspired by Southern life in the woods similar to the summers spent at his grandparents' place outside of Lexington so many years ago.

And maybe when he came back he would feel a little more like he had just over a year ago, when life promised more than he believed he ever deserved but all that he'd ever wanted.

Two

After receiving the package from Mick three days later, Isaac had wasted no time going online to research the town. He found nothing of particular interest other than information regarding an annual Turnip Festival held there the first week of October which he'd (fortunately) just missed. The town itself lay roughly seventy-five miles south of Atlanta on the southeastern edge of Logan County. The following morning he loaded up his guitar, a duffle bag of clothes and toiletries, and hit the road.

When he had turned onto Highway 61 just a few miles outside of Atlanta, the road had been crowded with strip malls, Wal-Marts, and fast food joints. The further south he'd traveled, the thinner the businesses became until he saw nothing but nature, and he eventually began to wonder if he'd passed his destination. Then, rising up from the heavily wooded view ahead was the courthouse dome, shining dully in the cloud-choked afternoon sky. The trees parted, and the town swam into view.

It wasn't hard to miss the town of Holden. Not that it was a sprawling metropolis; far from it. The town proper consisted of a large brick courthouse which was obviously the pride of the people who lived there. Each side boasted four stout columns rising up two floors to support the gables offering shelter from the light rain currently passing through. Highway 61 entered the town at an angle, poking between two of the four strips of surrounding brick buildings that housed various establishments. There was a photographer's studio, a pawnshop, and even the mandatory barbershop, complete with the striped pole. The road circled the courthouse and exited between the opposite two buildings. There were parking spaces around the courthouse and along the building fronts, broken up by dull green lawns and the occasional bench. Outside of the four older buildings were a sheriff's office, a library, and various other requirements of small-town USA, each obviously of newer construction but fitting into the scene quite well.

A few days before leaving, Isaac had called his sister and told her the news regarding his recent inheritance. Sylvia, as baffled as he was, had expressed some concern as to whether it was legitimate. He had laughed off her suspicions, assuring her that a crazed stalker wouldn't go through the trouble of faking his or her own death ten years prior, not to mention offering up a healthy piece of land as bait.

Isaac pulled into an open parking space across from the Bargain Barn ("If we don't have it, you don't need it!") and sat for a few minutes, watching the folks who were undeterred by the gloomy, wet weather. The rain had picked up, large beads of it moving across the hood of his '69 Boss 302 like slippery, black mercury. The car was the only major expense he'd allowed himself when the royalty check cleared. After that, he'd invested some of the money and bought his sister the land on which she and her family now lived.

After sitting for a minute, Isaac realized the engine was still running. He turned the key, letting the low rumble fall silent, and listened to the rain pound the roof. In the otherwise silent cab of the Mustang, Isaac could hear his stomach protesting the length of time that had passed since breakfast. The drive had been a leisurely one, and though he'd grabbed coffee and a few chicken biscuits on the way out of Nashville, that had been almost six hours ago. His stomach had every right to complain.

To the right of the Bargain Barn stood Mama's Kitchen, advertising the "best home-cooked meals this side of grandma's." Isaac's grandmother, besides being the most headstrong, vocal Southern woman he'd ever known, could make biscuits that made the fast food attempts at such seem like a crime.

"Okay, Mama. Let's see what you got."

Isaac slipped out of his car and jogged toward the restaurant, pulling the collar of his denim jacket up over his head to keep his hair from getting wet. Stepping carefully across the broken stretch of sidewalk, he reached out, pulled the door open, and was greeted by the tinkling of a bell

tied to the inside handle. He kept his gaze on his boots as he stomped away the loose drops of rain and dried his hands on his jeans.

When he looked up, Isaac was taken aback at how familiar the place appeared. It was straight out of an episode of *Andy Griffith*: the perfect television stereotype of a small-town diner. A long counter hooked out of the left wall and ran all the way down to the back. The swinging door at the end could only lead to the kitchen, as that was where the sizzle of a grill and the rich, heady smells seemed to be coming from. On the other side of the room were six booths made of high-backed benches padded in a dark red vinyl, patched here and there with duct tape but otherwise in decent shape. Down the middle were five tables turned at forty-five degree angles to the booths, each with four chairs.

Isaac glanced down at his watch and took note of the time: just before two in the afternoon. Looking back up, he was not surprised that the only other customers were a young couple in the back booth and three older gentlemen settled in at the counter. By the looks of the couple, they were just passing through; Isaac didn't suspect many thirty-somethings in this area wore Izod shirts with Dockers or skirts that short. The men at the counter, however, were the epitome of the "regulars" he would expect in such a place. Each had a cup of coffee set before him, one hand keeping warm on the side of the mug while the other lay flat on the counter. And, unlike the couple in the booth, they were all looking at him.

Isaac nodded at the three men. Two of them reciprocated before turning their attention back to their drinks and taking up their conversation with each other. They stared straight ahead, as if they were speaking to themselves. The man closest to Isaac stared a bit longer, his brow creasing down slightly, before finally nodding and turning to stare ahead with his two companions.

The door to the kitchen opened and a young woman, easily a decade younger than Isaac's thirty-two years, approached the three men. That was when Isaac noticed the polished steel wall behind the counter, and realized the men were looking at each other in the reflection while speaking, as if to save the energy required to keep their heads turned in conversation.

The waitress spoke a few words to the men, laughed at a joke Isaac couldn't quite hear, and then glanced his way. Her face lit up with a look that exuded pure hospitality. *New York could use a few hundred of you*, he thought, remembering his first and only trip to that city, courtesy of Righteous Sound Records.

"Hi there," she welcomed. "Go on and have a seat wherever you like and I'll be right with you."

Isaac raised his hand in acknowledgement and walked over to take a seat at the counter, leaving two spaces out of courtesy between himself and the elder to his left. The waitress had ducked back into the kitchen.

"I don't stink that bad, do I?" It was the old man closest to him. "Scoot on over stranger. We could use the company. Harold here is all out of good stories and Mitchell is too deaf to care."

"Okay then," Isaac agreed, closing the gap to sit next to the man.

"Name's Albert Trammell," he said, extending his right hand. "That's Harold Soseby and Mitchell Withers."

Isaac shook Albert's hand. "Isaac Owens."

"Nice to meet you, Ike. I can call you Ike?"

"I don't see why not," Isaac agreed.

"Good. I had a cousin named Isaac and the only ones who called him that was his mother and wife. I reckon I don't look much like either to you, so I'll stick with 'Ike.'"

Isaac laughed and the waitress reappeared. He glanced up at her and noticed a familiar look he still hadn't gotten used to. Her eyes were half closed, head cocked slightly to one side and a small grin playing along her lips.

"You're Isaac Owens, aintcha'?" she asked, her words dripping with awe.

Isaac smiled and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"You know this stranger?" Albert asked, looking between the two and most likely wondering

how anyone else in town would know someone he didn't.

"I sure do! Well, not really, but I know who he is." She reached over and gave Albert a playful smack on the arm. "Don't you ever listen to the radio, you old coot? This is Isaac Owens, the singer."

Albert shrugged at Isaac, his eyes drawn wide. "Well, I guess that makes me the town fool, eh Ike?" He poked Isaac with his elbow and laughed before taking a loud slurp of his coffee.

"I can't believe it," the waitress (Sissy, according to her name tag) said, setting down a glass of ice water and hot coffee in front of Isaac. "I've been listening to your album just about every day since it came out, what, two or three years ago?"

Isaac blushed. "Thank you, Sissy, I appreciate it."

"You a country singer, Ike?" Albert asked, turning in his seat to face the younger man. Mitchell and Harold had done the same, both of them now looking on with apparent interest.

"No, silly," Sissy answered for Isaac. "He's got a sound all his own. A little bit country, a little bit folk. Even a few rock songs that would knock you off your stool."

Albert nodded approvingly and slipped a sly wink at Isaac. "Pardon my ignorance, Mr. Owens. I don't get out much, except to this place. And no slight intended to your talent, but it takes a lot to get me off of this here stool."

"No offense taken," Isaac laughed.

Sissy stood there a moment, smiling and staring at Isaac, until finally shaking off her daze and pulling a menu from under the counter. "Welcome to Holden, Isaac Owens. You've made my day for sure." She slid the menu toward him and winked. "I'll make sure whatever you decide on doesn't ruin your visit here."

"Might want to try the McDonald's out by the interstate, Ike," Albert quipped.

"Hush, you," Sissy scolded. "For someone who's here every day, you don't have much room to complain." She looked back at Isaac. "Just let me know when you're ready, honey." The giddy young waitress slipped away into the kitchen and, shortly thereafter, Isaac could hear excited squeals as she undoubtedly made a few phone calls to share her news.

"Sounds like you made a new friend before you hardly stepped foot in town," Albert said between sips of coffee. Mitchell and Harold had gone back to staring in the polished steel wall, though Isaac could see their eyes glance at him now and then. They were no longer talking to each other, so he guessed they each had at least one ear on his and Albert's conversation.

"Seems so," Isaac answered, setting the menu down after deciding on the patty melt with a side of home fries. "I'm still getting used to it, to be honest, but it's nice to know people like what I'm doing."

Albert nodded again and held his cup up to his lips a little longer than necessary. Isaac could see the old man was forming his next question, most likely not wanting to appear too intrusive.

"What brings you to our neck of the woods?" And there it was. Harmless at most, but Albert seemed a little embarrassed with being so direct. He followed his question with another, likely an attempt to soften the intrusion. "Just passing through or do you have family in Holden?"

"It's kind of a strange story," Isaac started, and Albert waved a hand to let Isaac know he didn't mean to pry. But Isaac already felt comfortable here, like slipping into an old pair of boots he hadn't worn since childhood that, amazingly enough, still fit perfectly. "I don't mind telling you if you don't mind listening."

Albert lifted his arm and looked at the old Timex wrapped around his wrist.

"Well, I was going to feed the pigeons out by the fountain, but I'll have my secretary call and cancel."

Isaac smiled, laughing at the old man's warm sense of humor.

"Fair enough. It seems I inherited some land out this way. Almost fifty acres, in fact."

Albert frowned. "Sorry to hear that. Was it a close relative that passed?"

Isaac sipped his coffee, then shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It was set up in a trust ten years ago with instructions to give it to me now. I don't even know who it's from and the lawyers

aren't allowed to tell me."

Albert watched Isaac's face closely, a whisper of a grin at the edge of his mouth. It was an expression easy to read and Isaac raised his right hand.

"Honest to God, Albert," he assured the man. "Didn't I tell you it was a strange story?"

"You did, at that," Albert agreed, and Isaac could see the curiosity sparking in the man's rheumy eyes. "No idea who it's from, huh? Where's it at?"

"It's south of here, near the edge of the county. Forty-eight acres with a house and barn, as I understand it."

Albert turned to his companions and didn't even pretend they hadn't heard Isaac. "Sound familiar to you boys? Harold, you live out that way. Anybody die out there about ten years ago?"

Mitchell had turned to Harold, whose face was screwed up into a look of concentration, his eyes pointed toward the heavily stained tile ceiling. When he looked back down and met Isaac's gaze, Isaac again saw something in the man's eyes that hinted at familiarity, as if the man recognized him. Another fan, perhaps? Isaac rubbed a hand across his mouth, hiding the smirk that followed this thought.

"Speak up, old timer. You know where he's talking about or not?"

Harold nodded and tore his gaze from Isaac to look at Albert. "Sounds like it could be the Willoughby place out on Mt. Zion. But ain't nobody lived there for over forty years." Harold glanced back at Isaac, finally forming the question that had apparently been bothering him since the young singer entered the restaurant. "You sure you've got no family in these parts?"

"Why's that?" Albert butted in. "He look like some lost kin to you?" When Harold didn't respond, Albert joked "Or are you just trying to cash in on this young man's fame, *cousin* Harold."

Mitchell let out a scratchy cackle, obviously delighted with Albert's crack on Harold.

"Aw, shut it," Harold muttered and turned away.

Isaac decided to answer the question anyway. "I've got family in Tennessee and up north, but nothing as far south as this."

"Then it seems we have ourselves a mystery, Ike. Nothing like a good mystery to get a sleepy town like Holden to perk up."

Sissy returned to take Isaac's order, soon after which the talk turned to standard issue conversation: politics, career, and sports. The three older gentlemen were pleased to discover they had a fellow fan of the Georgia Bulldogs in Isaac Owens, thus declaring that rock stars weren't half as bad as expected. Once he'd finished his lunch and signed a few autographs for Sissy and her three younger girlfriends who'd just happened to come by the diner for a snack, Isaac paid his tab and rose to leave.

"It was really nice talking with you all. I'll make sure to stop by before I head out of town."

Albert turned on his stool to shake Isaac's hand again. "Now don't be a stranger. You'll probably get pretty bored out at that end of the county and we could always use some fresh blood in here."

"I'll keep that in mind." He turned to wave at Sissy and her gaggle of friends. "Nice meeting you ladies. Mitch, Harold." The other two men nodded at Isaac in similar fashion as they had upon his arrival.

As Isaac passed through the door and back into the rain, he heard Albert call out, "And keep us posted on your big mystery, Ike! We could use the excitement!"



Driving south again on 61, Isaac stopped to fill up the Mustang at a small gas station about a mile outside the center of town. He garnered some curious looks from the haggard woman behind the register, but no questions about where he was headed. She seemed more concerned with the small black-and-white television keeping her company behind the counter and the cigarette perched between her dry, yellowed fingers. Isaac wasn't sure, but he thought he saw traces of pulverized sawdust ground down between the wood planks under his feet, and wondered if the

same woman had been working here when the last batch had been scattered across the floor decades ago.

After a few stray buildings passed by, the trees once again took over the landscape, crowding in toward the road like angry locals staring down the outlander. They were tall, mostly pines with the occasional patch of hardwoods, only a few species of which Isaac could identify. The rain had increased, and after another twenty minutes on the road, just when he was sure he'd missed his turn, the green sign reading "Mt Zion Trl" sprung from the tree line. The wheels of the old car locked up in the last few feet of deceleration, causing the rear to swing out just enough to get Isaac's adrenaline pumping. He managed to stop just in time, and wrestled the wheel counter-clockwise to make the turn.

Isaac winced as the front wheels of his car dropped a few inches from the blacktop onto the gravel road that was Mt. Zion Trail. He let off the gas before the rear wheels breached the drop, then released the breath he'd been holding when he didn't hear the scraping of metal against road. It was the damn rain! He could hardly see the reflective sign, much less the surface he was driving on. A fine mist whipped about the road, the wind creating a haze of water and backsplash that rose inches above the ground.

Listening to the churn of gravel under him, Isaac slowed the car down to twenty and brought the piece of paper with the directions close to his face. He read down as far as he'd gone, ascertaining he only had another two miles to go before arriving at the house: 100 Mt. Zion Trail, Holden, Georgia. Two miles driving the suburbs of Nashville sometimes seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. This road was a completely different journey, taking Isaac through several sharp turns every few hundred feet. Some of the hills off to the left and right were steep enough to turn his stomach, the image of his car sliding off into a ravine and ricocheting like a pinball against the trees materializing in his thoughts.

But he managed to stay on the road, and quickly became amazed at how the topography had changed so dramatically from the flatlands occupying most of the scenery between Atlanta and Holden. The woods were thicker as well, and Isaac thought he caught a glimpse of a creek winding its way through them at the bottom of the slope, far below the road. The hardwoods were more common here, and even though the rain and bleak skies dulled the life of everything in sight, Isaac found himself enamored with the multitude of colors that made up the canopy and floor of the surrounding forest.

Suddenly the land opened up, and he found himself at the base of a valley. He brought the car to an idling stop as he took in the scene around him. He'd reached his destination, as the road ended roughly fifty yards ahead. Just before the abrupt meeting of gravel and more trees there was a driveway stretching off to the right, disappearing behind a small copse of dogwoods. It reappeared before ending at a moderately large house. The rain had yet to let up, and he could not tell much about the building from the road, but he could tell that the land there was fairly level all the way to the house and beyond.

Isaac glanced in the opposite direction, off to the left. On that side of the road the land sloped upward, making the trees seem to grow infinitely taller as his eyes followed them up the hill. His head bumped the window glass as he leaned down to see the peak of the mountain, though unsuccessfully. He laughed and rubbed the spot on his forehead that had touched the glass. His gaze settled back to road level and he noticed a break in the trees: another driveway, though quite unassuming compared to the grand entrance across the street flanked with two large magnolia trees.

The mailbox to the left read "90" and Isaac peered again into the rain but could make out nothing but trees and gloom. He lifted his foot from the brake and let the car coast another thirty yards to the other driveway. The mailbox there, constructed from river rock and mortar, had the number "100" bolted to the front in large, cast iron digits. This was the place.

Isaac was mildly disappointed that the weather had ruined the grand unveiling of his inheritance, though he knew it was but a romantic notion based on his own imagination. As he

neared the house, he caught a glimpse of the barn further out in the valley, though partially obscured by a run of trees. The rain was making it difficult to judge distance and anything beyond basic shapes. The car rolled down the drive, the gravel underneath the tires sounding quite loud as the vehicle shimmied across the surface. It was fresh gravel, he could tell that much, and he wondered if it were recently laid here on his account.

A second phone call from Mick had enlightened him as to the instructions included in the transference of the property. Enough money had been set aside to reinstate all of the utilities: phone, electric and water. An inspection had even taken place to ensure the house was habitable. Isaac thought these preparations were quite thorough, if not a little presumptuous. He was only here to check it out, maybe stay a week or two to get his spirits back up, his mind right. Then, after he found himself disenchanted with the place, he would put it up for sale and take what he could get.

Of course, there was the whole matter of why the property had been passed on to Isaac to begin with. That was a big part of the allure, he had to admit. And the answers he'd hoped to uncover may or may not play a large part in his decision on whether or not to keep the house and land.

The distracting cloud of thought lifted as he arrived at the house. Rainwater flowed down the windshield in a continuous sheet of obscurity, preventing him from getting a good view of the structure. He ran the wipers a few times, but it did no good; the downpour seemed to have doubled its effort at drowning out any chance of making his arrival grand in any way. Isaac twisted in his seat, groping in the rear floorboard for the umbrella he kept there. As he stared out the back window, one hand flopping blindly around on the carpet, he saw a blur of headlights from the road turning into his driveway. The vehicle looked blue, maybe green, and it stopped, still pointed at the house. It sat there for a half a minute before backing up to point itself in the opposite direction. Isaac squinted through the rain, trying to get a fix on the make of the vehicle. It was no use.

"Local curiosity," Isaac chuckled. "Gotta love it."

His hand finally found the umbrella pushed up under the passenger seat. He twisted back around, now adequately armed against the deluge. With a deep breath that soaked his insides with the pervading humidity, Isaac slipped out of the car and popped the umbrella open. He faced this new twist in his life head-on for the first time, separated only by a thick haze of water and wind.

Three

Isaac stood on the front steps of the wrap-around porch. Very little rain was landing on him; the wind came from behind the house and swooped around, pulling most of the drops away in its wake. It was these drops flying across his peripheral vision that gave him pause. The motion of the rain seemed to slow for the smallest fraction of a second. Within that small window of time, Isaac also sensed a change in the air within the space he occupied. It was as if he'd entered an invisible bubble, one that stood outside of the time and space he regularly occupied. Then the feeling was suddenly gone.

How's that for a grand reception? he thought, and took the final step up onto the porch. He turned around, sure he would see some disturbance in the air through which he had just passed. Of course he did not, and reflecting on how quickly the experience had occurred, Isaac reasoned it was probably just a combination of road fatigue and the weather.

He turned to face the house again and noticed how the white siding practically glowed in the gloom of the afternoon. It had been painted recently, but there was no mistaking the real wood grain lying beneath that brilliant coat of latex. The bottom edge of each board seemed to follow a natural grain path as well, so it was a good bet that this was the original siding. As a passing thought, Isaac wondered when the house had been built.

Closing the short distance from the stairs to the door, Isaac dug into his jacket pocket for the set of keys Mick had sent him. He pulled them out and flipped through them casually. There was one key labeled "Barn" while the last two appeared identical and were not labeled at all. He slipped one into the keyed knob and turned, then did the same with the deadbolt a few inches higher on the door. Putting the keys back in his pocket, Isaac turned the knob, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

Though he hadn't noticed while outside, it quickly became obvious the house was adorned with a metal roof. Even from the first of two floors he could hear the constant tapping of the rain echoing down the stairwell in front of him and just to the right. It was a sound he hadn't heard in a very long time, not since he'd begged his grandfather to let him camp out in the shed one night while visiting. That was easily twenty years ago, and the memory clung to his thoughts like a wet strand of spider silk, tickling his mood until a smile broke upon his lips.

Isaac stepped further into the foyer and found a mud bench against the wall, a place where visitors could sit to remove and store their soiled footwear. Surprised by its presence, he glanced off to the left through an open doorway where he could make out the shape of a chair and couch in the shadows. Mick had made no mention of the place being furnished. Was Isaac going to be roaming around a dead person's home, still full of the deceased's possessions? A place that hadn't been lived in for at least ten years, forty if Harold from the restaurant was right? These ponderings sent chills up his spine, down through his arms and legs. It didn't help that the place *smelled* like it had been empty at least that long. Not a bad or rotten smell, just abandoned.

He took a few more steps, the noise of his boots against the wood floors bouncing around the two-story foyer like rogue bullets. Even in the poor lighting, Isaac could see the fine craftsmanship of the stair banister. It followed the stairs up to a small landing, then cut back with the steps until reaching the second floor, where it whipped back around along the small walkway to the upstairs hall. It looked well-polished, managing to give off the slightest sheen even without help from the antique chandelier hanging from the ceiling above his head.

Isaac took a step back and turned, looking for a light switch. He found a set next to the door, and flipped them both up. The foyer and front porch bloomed with light, and he winced at the unexpected change in color and detail around him. The rich brown of the floor and banister grabbed his attention. Shadows played across the carvings along the handrail and, upon closer inspection, Isaac realized his admiration for the craftsmanship had been well-deserved. Even the crown molding and baseboard had the same level of detail, which led Isaac to believe the

handiwork was nearly as old as the structure; you couldn't find this kind of product these days. And considering the condition of what he had seen so far, it was obvious that the care and effort that went into building this house had not gone unappreciated through the years.

The house seemed much larger on the inside, though Isaac knew he'd yet to get a good look otherwise. The rest of the first floor showed much of the same reverence for fine workmanship: from the wainscoting in the front dining area to the solid oak cabinetry throughout the kitchen. There was also a living area (which was indeed still furnished, the items covered with drop clothes coated with a thick layer of dust), a breakfast area adjacent to the kitchen, a small half-bathroom under the stairs in the foyer, and a laundry room at the rear of the house branching off from the kitchen.

Isaac was again surprised to find all of the necessary appliances in place, all seemingly brand new. The kitchen boasted an electric range and large refrigerator, both as white as the fresh paint on the siding outside. He was relieved to see a matching coffee maker atop the counter. In the laundry room – which seemed to be a later addition to the house due to the slight drop of the floor and different linoleum pattern – were a large capacity washer and dryer, also apparently new.

It's as if someone was expecting me, he thought.

By the time Isaac finished his tour of the ground floor, he noticed the noise from the rain had subsided a bit. In the foyer he glanced out the door (still open from his entry) and saw that it had indeed eased up. He checked his watch, noted that it was closing in on half past four, then turned back to the foyer and began his ascent up the stairs.

At the top, Isaac took a moment to appreciate the large, single-paned window overlooking the front yard. Though the clouds seemed to be thinning, it was the time of year when nightfall crept in earlier, so the view was not much better for the improvement in weather conditions. He begrudgingly accepted that he would have to wait until tomorrow to explore the lay of the land, and the anxious child in him winced at the thought of delaying his trip to the barn.

He moved toward the main upper hall, pausing to decide in which direction to explore first. Finding a light switch on the wall to his left, he flipped it on and moved down that side of the hall. There were four doors, two on either side of the hall. Isaac opened each and leaned in, flipping more light switches to find similar mid-sized bedrooms. The two rooms on the left side of the hall were a mirror image of those on the right. Behind the door near the stairs he found a large bathroom straight out of an antique collector's dream. A claw-foot tub sat in one corner under a system of piping that ended with a detachable showerhead worthy of washing large zoo animals. The shower curtain was pushed open, hanging from a sturdy, stainless steel track system. A pedestal sink, perfectly matched to the tub, sat on the other side of the room under a large, oval mirror. The toilet was a few feet from the sink, near the corner opposite of the tub.

Isaac backed out of the bathroom and continued down the hall. This side of the house was almost identical to the other, though instead of four doors there were only three. He opened the two adjacent doors on the front side of the house. As before, each door opened up into similar rooms. However, the single door across the hall opened into a very large room twice the size of the others. And, unlike the previous six rooms, this one was furnished.

Isaac could make out, under several drop cloths like those downstairs, the shapes of a large bed butted against the far wall, a dresser near the door and opposite the bed, and a small couch to his right. There were two windows overlooking the back yard in the far wall. The rain was down to a mere drizzle, and he could see a crimson hue coloring the tops of a few large trees behind the house, making them appear as if ablaze. That would put the rear of the house facing east, and the front porch a fine place to settle in to watch the sunset some evening.

As Isaac moved toward one of the windows, he began to feel something different about this particular room. Yes, it was larger than the others, most likely intended as a master bedroom, but there was more to his inclination. He paused and looked around, trying to force that nagging little difference into a more solid form in his thoughts. Then, after running quick mental images of the other rooms, he realized the difference.

The large bedroom in which he currently stood had originally been two. All of the other rooms had what looked like painted, pinewood strips making up the walls. This room, however, was more modern, enclosed by sheetrock that had been taped, mudded and painted just like millions of other homes built since the mid-20th century. Just to be sure, Isaac stepped closer and placed his hand against the smooth, cool surface, then rapped his knuckles against the wall a few times. It was definitely sheetrock; plaster wouldn't have such a hollow "thud" when knocked upon.

Isaac looked down at the floor, which resembled the same wood construction as the rest of the house. However, down the middle of the room, bisecting the northern and southern halves, there seemed to be a strip of floor slightly darker than the rest, as if it had been protected from sunlight or other such elements. That was clearly enough to deduce the room had originally been two smaller areas, similar to (if not an exact match of) the other rooms on the second floor.

It was really nothing to spend time examining, but for some reason Isaac found it odd. Perhaps it was because, even with the three large pieces of furniture currently in the room, it still seemed far larger than necessary for a bedroom. It was unlikely now, he reasoned, that this was the same house Harold had mentioned, the one in which no one had lived for forty years. This seemed to be a recent renovation. Possibly part of the instructions in the trust to accommodate him in some way, like the new appliances? Not likely. But, then again, how much of the whole scenario seemed likely to Isaac at this point?

His thoughts chased each other for a moment before he suddenly realized how tired he felt. He still needed to run back into Holden, at least for dinner and breakfast supplies if he wanted to get an early start checking out the surrounding property. As tempting as it was to throw back the dusty cloth and try out the bed standing a few feet from his tired body, Isaac instead rubbed his face in his hands and turned around, leaving the room.

As he turned to shut the door, Isaac noticed a tremor in the wall to the right of his hand where it rested on the doorknob. It was as if the light in that particular area had just *shivered*, disturbed by some otherwise unnoticed breeze. He felt no vibrations in the doorknob or the slightest puff of wind to indicate it was anything other than a visual aberration.

Isaac released the handle, took a step back and blinked, thinking he needed to clear away whatever microscopic particles had wafted into his eyes. He looked back at the wall and the strange phenomenon was gone. Just dust in his eye then, his vision momentarily thrown off balance by a few cleansing tears. He stepped forward again, reaching for the doorknob. Though he was laughing at himself under his breath, he couldn't help but shoot a nervous glance toward that area of the wall.

And there it was *again*. Briefly, then gone.

He stood still, afraid if he moved that it would return, yet also afraid if he didn't move he might lose his chance to find out what was causing it. Isaac could feel the hot rush of adrenaline flooding his muscles. His breath had quickened, little blasts of air rushing from his nostrils. The thud of his heart caused light tremors in his temples and neck, the arteries stressed with the sudden burst in pressure.

Whether out of fear or curiosity, Isaac let his hand drop from the knob once again and slowly backed away from the door. As he did, he watched the wall just to the right of the opening begin to change, shimmering as if submerged in shallow water. Keeping his head stationary, he let his eyes – stretched open so wide he expected to hear them creak against the stress – wander around the rippling surface, gauging its area and position.

One obvious trait was the aberration's shape. It was clearly a tall rectangle, and Isaac did not miss the fact that it was similar to, if not *identical* to, the doorway at which he currently stood. Noticing this, he realized the position of the phenomenon was exactly where a door should be if the wall matched the other three in the hallway.

This is how it looked before the renovation he thought, his mind quickly putting the pieces together. *Like phantom pains from an amputated room.*

Isaac wished he were in a better frame of mind to appreciate that analogy, but the shift in surface and light occurring before him did not let up as long as he kept his head just so. To test this, he began to slowly lean further back toward the middle of the hall. The mirage began to fade, and he quickly moved back until it was stronger again. Then, without regard to the instinctive fear welling up inside of him, he leaned closer to the phantom door, taking a step forward to halve the distance between it and himself.

At waist level, halfway up the left side of the shimmering form, Isaac watched a doorknob materialize from the blur. He moved closer, and the wavy surface of the wall stabilized until he could see an actual door, the same as all the others on this floor, though not appearing as worse for the wear. The handle looked to be in better shape as well, neither tarnished nor dulled with age. And as he stood there, his face and body a few short inches away from what now could be seen clearly as another door previously not there, Isaac held his breath and closed his eyes in an attempt to pull himself out of whatever feverish daydream he'd fallen into.

He opened his eyes and it was still there. A real door, right next to the one he'd just exited. Right there in front of him.

He reached out, his body twitching at the cold snap of static electricity leaping toward his fingers before they closed around the knob and turned.

Pushing the door open, Isaac stepped into the darkness beyond.

Four

When Isaac was a child growing up in rural Knoxville, there had been a cattle auction facility that doubled as a slaughterhouse not far from his home. It was a sprawling complex of metal and concrete buildings (built at various times as the business had grown throughout the years) and sat in the middle of a large area of cleared land. Off to one side was a dirt lot where he and his father would park the old Ford pickup on the occasional Saturday afternoon. Isaac's family had a small farm, so a visit to the auction only rarely involved the purchase of an animal. It was mostly an excuse for he and his father to spend some time together while his sister and mother did the same.

One summer there had been some trouble at the site. From what little Isaac could gather from the hushed tones of his parents, two men had gotten into an argument over a woman. One of the men had then gone to his car, brought back a gun, and chased the other man down, cornering the runner in an empty cattle stall where he shot him three times, killing him. The facility was shut down for two weeks during the investigation while the police examined the crime scene and gathered testimony. Two weeks was actually considered a short amount of time for the local authorities to handle such a tragedy, but it was plenty enough for a pair of ten-year olds to muster the courage required to explore the scene of the crime one hot August afternoon.

Isaac and his cousin, Eddie, had met up in the woods that separated their family farms. Instead of racing their bikes over the well-worn trail down to the creek and into the pasture their families shared, they'd decided it would be much more interesting to take a look around the auction house. The two boys cut through the woods on foot, wrestling their bicycles through thick bramble and over fallen trees until they came out on the northern edge of the facility property. They could have taken the road, even though it was a longer route, and gotten there faster. But ten was old enough to know that if they were seen approaching the buildings by a passing vehicle, word would undoubtedly get back to their parents.

Leaving their bikes at the edge of the woods, Isaac and Eddie hunched over in the high wheat grass and jogged across the field until they reached the rear of the main building. There were three doors, all locked. There were also two windows which opened into a small office area at one end of the structure. As Isaac tried one, he heard Eddie's exclamation of success and the rusty scrape of metal against metal as the other window slid open. In no time the two boys had scrambled through the opening, finding themselves inside.

The air conditioning had apparently been shut off to save on expenses while the place was closed down. The heat was so bad Isaac almost suggested it wasn't worth the effort, but he didn't want Eddie to think he was a sissy. Eddie could be quite harsh when it came to teasing him, already enjoying the occasional field day with Isaac's affinity for music. So Isaac kept his mouth shut and tried to breathe in the hot, sluggish air while resisting the urge to complain.

"Damn if it ain't hot!" Eddie hissed, pulling up the hem of his shirt to wipe the sweat that had already beaded up across his face. Isaac just nodded and followed him through the office door.

The smell was faint at first. Neither of the boys said anything about it until after they'd examined the small stall blocked off with yellow tape.

"You smell that?" Eddie asked, not taking his eyes from the rust-red stains on the dirt inside the stall.

"Yeah. Smells like road kill," Isaac answered and glanced over at his cousin in time to see that troublesome little spark in the boy's eye.

"Come on," Eddie said, starting off in the direction the scent seemed to be coming from.

It wasn't hard to find, and following the smell reminded Isaac of those cartoons where the dog would float along, its nose lifted and inhaling a smoky trail of something delicious. Of course, there was nothing tasty about the noxious odor he and Eddie were tracking. And when they opened the door to the slaughterhouse floor – which hadn't been cleaned in two weeks during the hottest part of the year – Isaac stumbled backward, barraged by the worst combination

of smells he could have imagined.

A bloated possum, rotting in a stagnant, mosquito-infested puddle near the creek.

The slice of cantaloupe that had somehow ended up tucked in the back of his closet for three weeks until his mother, insane with disgust and on a mission, had tracked it down.

The condition of the hallway bathroom last Independence Day when Uncle Butch had made his bean and cabbage stew using chicken stock that had gone bad.

It's all of those smells and worse, thought Isaac, gagging against his hand and backing further away from the door.

"Holy shit," Eddie choked out, covering his mouth. Isaac could still see the demented smile between his cousin's fingers. "Look at this."

Isaac, slow with apprehension, moved up next to Eddie and looked through the doorway. The floor of the room beyond seemed to be alive with the noxious fumes, shifting and writhing in pain. Both boys tensed up, ready to run until they realized the floor was covered with flies. What little bit they could make out underneath the living carpet was dark with old blood and gore. Here and there were bits of carnage, no doubt whittled down over the past several days by the buzzing horde. The steamy air rolling around them and out the door was sticky with the stench, and Isaac had to turn away. Before he could, he caught a glimpse of the hooks hanging along a runner system, and the large stainless steel table upon which various implements of death lay scattered, black with more blood.

Isaac introduced his breakfast to the floor a few feet from the door. He could barely hear Eddie's nervous chuckling as he spat out the last stray bits from his mouth. The relentless smell from behind him and the doughy scent of half-digested biscuits and gravy were too much, and Isaac sprinted back the way they had come. Eddie had not been far behind, and Isaac was grateful when his pasty-faced cousin said nothing about him losing the contents of his stomach.



That summer day long ago was the first thing to swim up from Isaac's dazed consciousness after he stepped through the door that wasn't there. More specifically, it was the smell of that slaughterhouse room, which he could still conjure a lingering sense of if he tried. Not that he'd want to.

As he passed through the door, his face submerging in that deep black nothing beyond the threshold, Isaac experienced a terrifying moment that could only be described as being *absorbed*. He felt as if his whole body was being broken down and distributed throughout the darkness, and that he would be lost there forever, diluted in the void.

Fortunately, the moment passed so quickly he believed he had started to blink when it began, and was just opening his eyes as it passed. It went through his bones like a flash freeze. Had he opened his eyes and seen only the darkness, his fear might have been subdued after a few moments of rational thought – *Hey, you're just asleep and dreaming*. However, the sight before him was not of that solid black he'd stepped into, nor was it of the room that should logically be there, furnished with the bed and other items.

Isaac did recognize that he was, in fact, in a room. And there was furniture, the most obvious item being a bed against the far right wall, though it was not the bed he expected. And the room was smaller, having only one boarded-over window instead of two. The remaining furniture wasn't what he expected either; there was a vanity with a large oval mirror and an armoire, both of which matched the basic design of the bed.

But these details, easily ascertained with a glance around the room, were overshadowed by one very undeniable trait that tied itself to Isaac's memory of that day in the slaughterhouse.

Jesus, that's a lot of blood!

It was as if someone had given a small child a large paintbrush and a gallon of dark red paint, then left him unattended for an hour or so. Wide swaths arced across one wall. A chair lay overturned near the vanity, a spattering of blood across the slats of its high back. The floor was a gooey, slippery mess, small puddles of congealing blood here and there where a trail seemed to

end or start. There were stains on the bed: a tangled, tie-dyed nightmare that led his eyes to what could only be the spot where whatever happened here had ended. To the right of the bed and touching the wall was a large, crimson pool. It looked like a dark liquid mirror lying on the floor, but for the thin, irregular band through the middle where Isaac guessed someone had been lying.

And there were the flies. Not nearly as many as what he and Eddie had seen that day, but enough to indicate it had been several hours since the events in this particular room had taken place. The smell – less intense than his memory, but with a sweet undertone that started Isaac’s stomach churning – draped itself around him like a cloak of death. He winced at the cloying odor, stumbling backward until his heels met with the resistance of the threshold behind him.

Isaac fell back into the darkness that swallowed him whole.



A flash of light behind Isaac’s closed eyelids accompanied a burst of pain that started in his skull and shot down through his neck, fizzling out at the base of his spine. His first instinct was to scramble backwards upon his hands and feet; anything to get away from that morbid scene he’d just witnessed. He only succeeded in smacking his head against the hallway wall again, and another jolt of pain roared through his body.

He fell into unconsciousness.



Isaac must have dreamed about the blood-soaked room as he slept. He awoke with the smell dominating his senses, but it faded like an exorcised specter when he opened his eyes to find the hallway ceiling looming above him.

When he tried to sit up he was quickly reminded of why he was lying there in the hall. A searing, electric pulse sizzled up his spine, awaking a heavy throb in his head. He reached up to feel the goose egg there, wincing as his fingers probed that tender lump under his hair. Clenching his teeth against the pain, he placed his palms on the floor and scooted backward so that he could rest against the wall. The exertion brought on a momentary bout of vertigo, and he rested his face in his hands until it passed.

As he sat there, Isaac began to remember exactly what had brought him to this point. The door, the room, the blood. He looked up at the wall, wincing from the ache in his neck. The door wasn’t there, of course, but then he remembered how he’d only seen it when approaching that area *just so*. With that recollection, he knew he could verify his sanity by simply trying to find it again. But when he imagined doing so, the feeling of dread that welled up from his gut was enough to deter him.

Instead, Isaac took a deep breath and forced himself up. The agony was almost enough to send him back to the floor, and his legs trembled beneath him. He gritted his teeth through the pain once again, then turned to prop himself against the wall a little longer to get his breath and strength back. Once he felt confident he could make it to the handrail next to the stairs, he shuffled in that direction, keeping both palms against the wall in the event he passed out again.

It took him a long time to reach the foyer; fifteen minutes by his estimate as he sat at the bottom of the stairs, panting and wishing like hell he had some aspirin. As he waited again to gather the energy and determination, Isaac noticed that the house was lit with sunlight. He had slept through the night.

The thought of that – lying there unconscious just a few feet from the scene of something so horrific – sent tiny shivers through his arms and legs, aggravating his pain. But then he considered the possibility he had dreamed the whole thing. Maybe he was ill and, upon passing out and knocking himself silly, he had fallen into a feverish sleep that had caused the horrible event to unfold in his imaginative subconscious. Or, being that it was an old house in which no one had lived for quite a while, perhaps the place was full of carbon monoxide fumes.

That’s it, he thought. Those fumes rise, don’t they? That’s why it hit me when I went upstairs. And that damn door was some kind of double-vision hallucination.

Isaac sighed from deep within his chest, relieved. He sat a moment longer, resolving to call

the fire department from his cell phone, still in the Mustang. He could sit outside and wait, keeping clear of the fumes. When they arrived, he would have them take a look at his head. A concussion was not the best welcoming gift, so hopefully he had only given himself a good bump.

After another ten minutes of cautious struggling, Isaac made it to his car. He collapsed down in the seat, muffling a small yelp as the pain flared. The cell phone was on the passenger side, though Isaac found little relief in the single bar indicating poor signal strength.

“Damn,” he hissed, then dialed 411. It took him three tries to get connected to the Holden City Fire Department. The young woman on the line had trouble hearing him, and just when Isaac thought he’d lost signal, her voice would pipe back up. After five minutes on the phone with her, it seemed she had gotten all she needed. He heard something that sounded like “We’re sending someone out now” before the phone beeped, indicating the call was over.

The sun was out, rising up from behind the house and casting him in shadow. He cranked the car to get the heat going. He hadn’t noticed the cold until the sweat from his exertion had started to cool. Fortunately, the old car took no time at all to warm up, and soon he was wiping condensation from the windows to get a better look at the house and yard while he waited.

The new paint looked even brighter in the approaching daylight. A low fog hung at the edge of the yard, poking out from the woods as if curious over the new arrival. There were a few large trees visible in the front yard, placed far enough apart as to not interfere with one another. They were old (some kind of willow, Isaac guessed) with low-flying branches, some of which were so heavy that they sloped out and touched the ground.

Spanish moss hung in the boughs like dusty spider webs. The lawn was well kept, a dark fescue variety that enjoyed the shade from the trees. Isaac also noticed that it seemed recently trimmed.

“You guys thought of everything,” Isaac whispered, thinking of the attorneys involved in the trust. Of course, they had simply been following instructions.

But whose?

Before he could get too deep in these thoughts, Isaac cocked his head to one side and turned the heat down while lowering his window an inch. The far-off wail of sirens was, he hoped, a good indication his phone call had been understood. It didn’t take long for help to arrive. The sirens grew louder, their echoes bouncing around in the small valley. Isaac could see the flashing lights through the trees as the emergency vehicles approached: a fire engine followed by an ambulance. He felt a little silly to be attracting so much attention his first twelve hours in this tiny town, but as he pulled himself out of the car and the pain reminded him why he’d called to begin with, he welcomed the strong sense of relief upon seeing them pull into his driveway.