

The Hollow Places

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PART ONE

Chapter One

For the driver, only three things existed: the road, the wheel and the woman in the back seat.

A glance in the mirror showed him nothing but the rear windscreen, so he took a look over his shoulder and saw that the woman hadn't moved, sitting with her head between her knees, a fall of dyed blonde hair, making burping sounds and sniffing.

"It's okay," Simon said and kept the car sliding through the darkness. He was enjoying a heightened state of awareness and sensed each turn before it appeared. His foot on the accelerator, he knew that they were unlikely to encounter anyone else on this road. It was just him and her.

When she sat up, her large, brown eyes were very dark and ringed with red. Her skin was waxy, streaked black with mascara.

"Oh-my-God, I am sorry," she sniffed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"It's okay," Simon said again.

It wasn't his car.

Unknown to her, Simon watched her wipe her hand on the fabric of the back seat and then strain to see past her ghostly reflection in the glass. He offered her a bottle of water.

"I don't think it is good for me," she said, her Parisian accent coming through. "It will just make me more ..." She gestured throwing up and had to suppress another wave of nausea. "We are nearly there?"

"This way will avoid the traffic," Simon said.

This way would avoid everyone.

Trees linked arms overhead, attempting to seal out the moonlight. Their leaves glowed preternaturally in the headlights before becoming ash-black and then scarlet as they rolled by. Ahead, a steep incline began winding down to the sea coast, but they would turn off before they reached the bottom.

"This might help," he said, winding his window part-way down.

The sound of waves smothering rocks and then sliding back, crashing and retreating, accompanied the fluttering of owls or bats and the scampering of unseen things in the trees.

He might have found it disturbing, but he was on a high now and found himself observing the fine, curly hairs on the backs of his hands before remembering the road. The road appeared to be undulating beneath him, as if their destination was sliding towards them and the car was still.

"So, you really think it is broked?" she asked, holding up her hand, which was very small and pale, except for her little finger, which was swollen and almost black.

"We need a medical opinion," Simon told her. "I'm a taxi driver."

He glanced in the mirror to see if she knew she was in trouble yet.

She was peering though the passenger windows, first one side and then the other. Both views offered her something that evidently upset her.

"This isn't London," she said. "Where is the hospital?"

Part of him wanted her to know what was coming, because he didn't want to lie to her anymore, but he knew that lying was for the best. If their roles had been reversed, he wouldn't want to know what was coming either.

"Not far now," he said, though his heart wasn't in it.

She was starting to panic.

"Doesn't your finger hurt?" Simon asked.

"Yes," she said. "It hurts. But I can't do anything about it, so why complain?"

"Good for you," he said.

"How long you have been a taxi driver?" she asked.

"Six years," he said.

"Why six years?" she demanded to know. "Why didn't you say five or seven? It's a lie, right?"

"I always say six years," Simon admitted. "I've been saying six years for two years."

"My mother owns a boutique and my father is a designer. They have money. A lot of money."

Some people attempted to develop a rapport with him to dissuade him from murdering or raping them. This young woman had gone straight to bargaining. She was sobering up fast and in other circumstances he might have liked her, though it was a long time since he had thought of anyone but him and his sister. Their survival came first.

The turn was coming up.

The usual sensation occurred as he slowed the car. He could feel the turn 'glowing', calling to him. It was like being pulled in by tractor beam.

He flicked off the lights.

"What are you doing?" She sat forward and he got a waft of vomit and perfume.

"Sit back," he ordered her. "A rabbit in the road, that's all. Headlights dazzle them."

She flopped back in her seat and Simon completed the narrow turning into the woods.

His eyes flicked back and forth from the forest to the rear view mirror.

She was trying the doors. Of course they were locked centrally. From the look in her eyes, she appeared to be thinking about screaming, but probably didn't want to admit that she was in that much danger yet. She saw no point in accelerating events when she may still be able to talk her way out of this, whatever this was.

She sucked in a lungful of air, stifling another wave of nausea. Still and tense, she stared at her reflection in the black glass, until she was over the worst of it.

"So ... Vincent," she began. "Why don't I call my parents, before my friends do, and organise some money? Then you let me to go. It is easy to do."

"I'll do a deal with you," Simon said. "You can ask me five questions and I promise to tell you the truth, answering yes or answering no. But then you have to stop talking."

His night vision had become very good over the last few years, so he was able to discern a route ahead by squinting through the windscreen. After a few moments, however, he found that he knew when to jog left and jog right, and gradually let go of control, guided. The vehicle bounced down a new incline, crunching dirt and dead leaves. They could have been driving in a bubble at the bottom of the ocean, or bumping along over the dark side of the moon.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Have you never played Twenty Questions? You can still have five."

"Stop fucking around," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not fucking around," he said. "Four."

"Can I please go home? Please."

"No."

"Please?"

Simon stopped the car, shut off the engine and faced her. "You can ask two more questions," he told her.

Her voice thinned. "Please don't hurt me. Vincent? Are you going to ...?"

"No," Simon said.

She couldn't announce her fears out loud. She still didn't want to make it real.

Simon opened her door from the outside and held open a plastic, supermarket bag.

"Empty your pockets into this," he said.

"I don't have money," she said. "I said to you. My parents have the money."

She squirmed around on the back seat, reaching into the pockets of her skin-tight jeans. It took some time, because she only had use of her right hand. She managed to retrieve a plastic lighter, some tissues and a phone number written in blue ink on a strip of paper. She dropped each one into the bag.

"My purse is in my handbag," she said.

"Drop it in," he told her and she unzipped it, searching for the purse. "No," Simon said.

"Your handbag. The whole thing."

She dropped it into the carrier and looked up into his face, holding his gaze. He imagined how he must look to her. It was difficult, because since he had got out of the car he felt very little. He watched her face for some clue as to how he might appear to her.

After thirty seconds or so, her eyes began to tremble. Whatever she'd been searching for in his eyes, she hadn't found it.

"Time to go," he said.

She managed to punch him in the face as he leaned in, but her fist glanced off his cheek and soon he was hauling her out into the night. As she struggled, she reignited the pain in her dislocated finger and cried out, so Simon clamped one hand over her mouth and that's where it stayed as he pulled her away from the car and forced her deeper into the forest. He held her body tight against him, knowing that her attempts to scream for help would give way to sobs. Soon, he could feel her tears and snot running over his fingers, the chill in the wind making his wet hand feel icy.

When her legs gave way, he responded by picking up his pace, dragging her towards the sound of waves until they came to a clearing, where he remembered to pop her finger back into place. He muffled her howl and subsequent whimpers. A couple of minutes later, she settled and he relaxed his hold on her.

She took in her surroundings, realising that all the while they had been approaching the edge of a cliff.

"Are you going to let me go now?" she asked quietly.

It had helped him to think of it as a game, but now she was all out of questions and he was out of time.

"Yes and no," Simon said. "You're going to be okay. After a few minutes, you won't know what's happening. You won't feel anything."

Stifling her protests, he dragged her through the rest of the clearing, towards the edge. Her eyes rolled and she stamped her bare heels, grinding her toes into the dirt, but he was much too strong for her. She was punching and kicking, but he lifted her from the ground, dumped her onto one shoulder and stood facing the drop.

Silvery clouds shrouded the moon in the dark, blue sky, and the black sea rolled below, toiling and growling up at them.

He imagined himself carrying her back to the car, setting her in the back seat, and driving back to the road before dumping her somewhere, alive, but the idea alone was enough to promote a headache. It was as if a finger penetrated the back of his skull and a sharp fingernail began peeling back a layer of brain.

“Okay!” he thought in response and winced. “I’m doing it!”

He pitched her over the edge, almost losing his footing in the process, making his stomach lurch.

She didn’t scream. The last sound she made was a gasp. Perhaps she was surprised that he'd really dropped her, or perhaps she was sucking in the air for a scream that didn't have time to materialise.

Simon peered over the edge in time to see her body disappear into an enormous wave. It arced over the rocks and plucked her out of the air. Sea water crashed against the cliff, showering Simon’s face, shoulders and chest. The woman's body was gone. Taken.

Only once had he been this close to the Creature.

Chapter Two

Three things contributed to Simon's survival and the survival of his sister. He delivered whoever the Creature asked him to, he thought ahead and he knew when and how to stop thinking entirely. He switched between modes as easily as he had switched gears in the car he had dumped.

Huge raindrops splattered on his raincoat - thinking ahead - which was good, because the rain would also help to confuse any evidence he had left behind.

As he walked, he was dimly aware of the Creature, circling his mind. It was doing so more proprietorially than with any real interest, but he made sure to give it nothing to consider or question anyway.

He turned to meditation. As he strolled along the narrow paths, the muddy roads and later the glistening streets, he imagined that everything was being washed clean. Even him.

He counted the footsteps that disturbed the flooded gutters and caused the reflected sky to tremble; he counted street lamps that turned raindrops into sparks; and he counted the occasional car that held him in its headlights before passing by, as if satisfied that he wasn't the one they were looking for.

*

Home was a two-storey brick building, boxy with a bay window, much like its suburban neighbours. He hadn't done any work on it since he inherited it, so it remained old-fashioned and in disrepair. He had intended to tidy things up, to repaint the walls and fix the leak in the bathroom, to lay wooden flooring and fix the hinges on the cupboards, or perhaps replace the kitchen entirely, with spotlights and an electric cooker instead of a microwave and a second-hand electric hob plugged into the mains.

He had begun the project well, ripping up the carpets in the bedrooms and stripping the peeling paper from the stairway and the bathroom walls. He'd removed the broken cupboard doors and had bullied furniture into what was now a store room downstairs in order to make room for repair work and painting. Having done this, however, he discovered that he lacked the proper motivation to finish a single one of the jobs.

Having discarded the things he didn't want, he discovered that it was enough that they were gone.

He was not short of funds, thanks to his inheritance from his father, via his mother, so he could have paid a builder to come in and do it all for him, but he refused. He never had any guests or workmen inside the house. It was a fortress and a sanctuary. Neither needed to be pretty.

Structurally, it was sound and his father had upgraded the windows and doors on every part of the house. The new front and back doors were fitted with toughened security glass and a turn of the handle sent five metal bolts into the frame with a clack. It wouldn't keep an intruder out if they were determined, but it would slow them down and hopefully that would be all he needed.

From the outside, it looked like any other house on their Essex street, only somewhat shabbier. It was set back from the road by a semi-circular drive, on which sat his shitty, metallic-

blue Toyota Corolla, and was protected from view by evergreens, which also flanked the property.

Although their nearest neighbour was thirty seconds walk away, he sometimes felt as though he was alone, living in one of the nearby forests. While this was good for privacy, which he protected fiercely, it also reminded him of events that he would sooner block out.

If trees really did communicate, then the news of what he had done on the cliff had reached home before him. He glanced up at the foreboding branches before unlocking the front door and ducking inside.

He was met by the familiar disarray of the kitchen/diner, where every available surface was occupied, not at all like those show homes in the adverts. This was real-life. Yet there remained an otherness to the house, as though he was looking at it all through tissue paper. He felt like he'd been away for years, although it had only been one night, and almost felt himself drifting across the room like a ghost.

It was not the house that was in any way unreal, he knew, it was him. He was still connected to the Creature and would be until It released him, minutes or hours from now. It was reasonable to assume that his work was done for the night, but he could feel It circling his mind. It was observing, but It made no further demands.

He set about domestic chores, although his body wanted him to collapse and dream. Sleeping while the Creature was in residence was the most dangerous thing of all, because that's when thoughts rose up, unbidden, and who knew what the mind would throw up when it was moving towards unconsciousness, crazy things, repressed memories, the truth. Instead, he emptied the washing machine and hung an armful of wet clothes over the radiators. They looked like multicoloured skins. He counted them as he went ... sixteen.

The sink was full of cups and plates, pots and pans, one in particular burnt black from an over-ambitious attempt to make flapjacks using convection setting on the microwave. He had left it to soak, but that had been some days ago and now it was a science project. He attempted to root out the plug to release the sludge of water, but there was no plug, only rotting food – peas, rice, spaghetti - and hair.

He unloaded the sink, so he could unblock it with the plunger.

One, two, three, four, five ...

Then, he began washing up.

Six dinner plates.

Three breakfast bowls.

Eight forks.

Five desert spoons.

Five tea spoons. There should have been six, but one of them had gone missing. He wondered if it wouldn't have been better to pare down to two of everything, rather than have to deal with all this shit he had inherited.

Eleven knives.

Throw it all away.

A corkscrew.

A manual juicer.

An electric tin opener. Broken.

He heard a toilet flush upstairs and then the sound of footsteps, on the stairs, in the hall.

“Hi,” the girl said.

Simon rinsed and stacked. Rinsed. Stacked.

She sat down at the breakfast bar and scooped up her college papers, underneath which lurked the mail from the last few days. For want of an empty space, she dumped them all on the floor next to her stool, then gave the same treatment to a large clothing catalogue and miscellaneous magazines and TV guides. She appeared to have been infected by Simon's cleaning drive, but then she uncovered what she had been looking for. She opened up the cardboard box and helped herself to a slice of cold pizza.

"Want some?" she asked.

Simon glanced at her and saw that she was wearing her blue dressing gown. The slice of pizza in her hand was yellow and green. She took a bite with her perfect, little teeth and a layer of hard cheese slid from the pizza base. She stuffed it into her mouth with her little finger. Although he had been desperately hungry, the sight turned his stomach. He bent over the sink and returned to scrubbing the non-stick surface from a frying pan.

"You know," she said, above the sound of scouring, "I've only got revision today. I could skip college. We could do something."

He could hear her flicking through the pages of a magazine.

"Sally," he said. "I think you should go to college today. Exams are important."

"They're not even real exams," she replied, not picking up on the fact that he'd called her Sally. "They're mocks, remember? And I can study at home, as if I need to. I'd probably end up skipping out later anyway. They're like kids. I'd quite like an adult conversation, or as close as I can get to one with you."

"I think it would be good for you to get out of the house today, Sally."

"We could go to the park," she suggested. "Scare the animals. Give them names."

"Perhaps if I ignore her," Simon thought. "Perhaps she'll get bored and go away of her own accord."

He hung the frying pan on the wall and dried his hands, before returning to the laundry, deciding to separate the pile into bright colours, dark colours and whites. Good. That was the next five minutes accounted for.

Her clothes were all mixed in with his. Most of her items went into the bright colours pile. She had put her tie-dyed dress into the basket, which made things a little bit more complicated. He'd have to separate the bright colours into two piles. He took his time, concentrating only on what he was doing, ignoring the smell of a pizza slice warming in the microwave and the sound of beeping when it was done.

The black pile he created comprised of fleecy jumpers, combat trousers and t-shirts, all largely the same colour, but different to his eye, because they were his clothes, most of which he had bought at army and navy stores a couple of years ago. He also extracted several pairs of black socks, a woolly hat and a pair of fingerless gloves from the mound of dirty clothes that had grown around the laundry basket like a tumour.

He was getting there.

Slowly.

Slowly was good.

Behind him, the girl dropped her magazine onto the floor where it landed with a slap. She made a farting sound with her mouth and switched the kettle on.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"No."

"Tea?"

"No, Sally. No tea."

“Hot chocolate?”

He straightened up, but still didn't look at her. “Go to college, Sal,” he said.

The girl sighed again. “Will you stop calling me that? I hate it.”

The white pile was always their smallest collection of clothing, but now, with the addition of a single bedsheet and a couple of pillowcases, he had enough for a full load. As he filled the machine, her bras reminded him that she wasn't a girl any more. Like him, she had grown up quickly. She was just bored, playing silly, but it was irritating nonetheless. He needed her out of his (thoughts) space, because despite the locks on the doors and all the security glass, he had a key; he was the crack in the windscreen.

“You were quiet last night. Maybe we can hang out today; have some fun. Remember that? Fun?”

“Maybe when you get back,” Simon said.

“But I can-“

He faced her at last and his expression cut her off mid-sentence. She dropped her pizza.

“Go away,” he said and she actually ran, taking the stairs quickly but one at a time. Stomp stomp stomp stomp stomp.

Perhaps she was still a kid after all, masquerading as an adult, as was he.

He heard her door slam shut.

Good.

Slam all the doors. The further away the better.

Chapter Three

At six in the evening, Simon woke slumped over the kitchen counter. His first thought was of Sarah and he groaned as he allowed the memories to spiral up.

He had frightened and upset her, but she should have known better than to press him, particularly after he'd been out all night. What did she think he'd been doing? Clubbing?

He had called her Sally half a dozen times. Yes, Sally. No, Sally. He had explained that he'd only call her that when something was wrong, but she had remained oblivious to his signals.

Maybe he needed to let her in on how much danger surrounded them. While he had no wish to make her afraid to leave the house, he did need her to be more alert.

Observing these thoughts, he analysed them and let them go. His anger with her behaviour was really anger with himself. She trusted him to make everything all right and he knew he was failing her. While her ignorance was the main danger to her, it was the thing he wanted to preserve most. Her ignorance was innocence.

He paced the kitchen, getting the feeling back in his legs, knowing that by the time she came home he would be calm and that they would attempt to make cornflake cakes and everything would be cool again for a while.

He reached for the remaining slice of pizza, which had sickened him earlier, and took half of it down in one bite. It was cold and wet and tasted of nothing, certainly nothing good, but his need was great and he shoved the remainder into his mouth. So it was that Sarah came home and found him chewing furiously. As he made room to speak to her, she made for the stairs. Sensible girl ... woman ... whatever ...

"Sarah," he spluttered.

She observed him carefully. He was never what she would consider relaxed. Early one morning, she had pushed his door open to see if he was home and he had been lying on his mattress on the floor, on his back, fully-clothed, staring at the ceiling.

"Go," he had said. He hadn't even turned to look at her. At the time, she had wondered if that was how he always slept, waiting for morning, trainers on, alert, ready for action, but since then she had seen him in all manners, sleeping at the counter, on the kitchen floor, on the stair. He always woke before she reached him.

Often, he smelled as though he had been to bars and she wondered if he had been clubbing without her, though she never smelled alcohol on his breath - had never seen him drink in fact, except for one three-day marathon session after mum died. Aside from that, he had never been so out of it that he hadn't been able to open at least one eye before she got close enough to check he was still breathing.

Go upstairs.

Go to bed.

Go away.

He was clearly feeling better now. Colour had returned to his cheeks. He was eating.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Simon managed to say, losing a green pepper in the process.

"I'm sorry too," Sarah said. "I should have thought."

"I think we both could have handled that better. Next time we will. We learn and move on, yeah?"

Sarah tried to smile although she was close to crying, because she couldn't deny that there would be a next time. And a next time after that. And after that. She looked away in the hope that Simon wouldn't see how despondent his words had made her.

"You've been out more often the last month," she observed.

Simon stopped chewing, aware that his eyes were drilling holes into her but unable to stop. She had never brought up the subject of his night-time missions. He had spoken of them often, but because she refused to engage with the subject he had no idea how much she had understood and how much she had discarded.

"I didn't realise you were out last night," she said, "I didn't hear you leave - so when I saw you this morning, I didn't realise you were ... you know ... here but not here."

Simon nodded, surprised by his reticence. He finally had her full attention and she actively wanted to know more about what was going on, but more than ever he felt that the life he had been given to live should not infect hers. He liked the fact that she didn't embrace the danger. The point of his existence was to protect her. He worked so she didn't have to.

"Last night," Sarah said. "Was it a bad one?"

"There are no good ones."

"Do you ... every time you go out, do you ... is there always ..."

"Almost always," Simon said.

Her eyes were trembling. "But it wasn't always like that, right? In the beginning, sometimes you would go and you didn't always ..."

Simon shook his head.

"So why is it changing now?" she asked.

"That's a good question," he said, stalling. After months of attempting to have this conversation and failing, he now found himself utterly unprepared. "There's a sense of urgency that wasn't there before," Simon admitted.

Sarah didn't move.

"I feel as though It's looking for something," Simon continued. "I think that soon It will find it and when It does it will leave us alone."

"Really?" She sounded desperate.

"Yes," Simon said. Although the Creature was not currently watching his thoughts, he could not entirely shut down the Simon-automaton he had created as his coping mechanism.

"I hope it happens soon," Sarah said.

Simon noted that she had come as close to the subject as she could bear. She wouldn't refer to the Creature itself. He wished that he could lay her thoughts out and see them as clearly as the Creature could see his.

The sitting area was illuminated solely by a small, grey, porcelain table lamp that had belonged to their mother. While they had been talking, it had grown darker outside and Simon was glad of the cover. Normally, he was an exceptional liar. The trick, he discovered, was to practice and to believe the lie, to make it real by living it, to find the element of truth and exaggerate it so that the lie existed in its shadow. It was a dangerous exercise, which kept him on a knife edge between an intolerable reality and a psychotic nightmare, but it was the only way to go on day after day, night after night. He couldn't keep up the pretence with Sarah though. He loved her too much. Her presence illuminated the holes in his stories.

He avoided her gaze by going to the window to close the blinds. The trees appeared to be have stepped together to protect them from the outside world. The house held its breath. The only noise was the buzz of electricity somewhere above and the refrigerator, humming to itself in an attempt not to hear the next part of their conversation.

In a hushed voice, accentuating the near-silence, Sarah asked: "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

She took an audible breath. "Kill them."

The motor of the refrigerator clunked off.

She had made the question sound almost casual and somehow it did not seem out of place among the plates and bowls and the broken food mixer and the coffee machine and the egg timer. It didn't seem like such a frightening question at all, until he tried to answer.

He opened his mouth to talk about the deliveries. It would be good to get it out. Perhaps sharing the horror of it would put a brake on the flashbacks and stop his eyes glazing over in the cereal aisle in Tesco or while licking the back of an envelope in the post office queue, or staring at the patterns made by paint peeling from the ceiling over the bath. He needed to share some of this information, to release the pressure, but not with her.

The woman he had delivered the night before may only have been two years older than Sarah. They had roughly the same figure; both studying; both smart. He had ripped her from the world she knew and cast her, gasping, to a fate unknown. How could he tell Sarah what he had done?

If the woman was still alive, perhaps it was worse than having died. Perhaps she was underwater, in the grip of the thing that had demanded her, stripped of flesh and mind. Or perhaps she had been lucky, torn into pieces and consumed. At least that way it would be over.

Or perhaps nothing happened down there. Maybe she was taken and returned to her life, her mind broken, but physically in tact.

Imagine it and it was possible.

It was not difficult to distance himself from the consequences of his actions while the Creature was with him. The whispers and Its guidance were seductive. Afterwards, however, when the Creature left his mind, he always had to face Sarah. No matter how deep he buried his memories, seeing her would make them creep back up.

"I don't need protecting any more," Sarah told him. "I want to help you. You need looking after."

Simon put his hands over his eyes. His fingers were ice cold. "Let's talk about this another time."

"You treat me like a kid," she said, "but I see what's going on. I've got questions and I deserve answers."

"I've tried to tell you," he said.

"You tell me that it's dangerous and that the danger could come at any moment and that I have to know where all the knives are and if I see anything inside the house I've got to run and I've got to keep my mobile phone on me at all times and you're going to go out sometimes and I have to avoid you, except it's hard to tell when that is, so if I can't avoid you I mustn't ask any questions; I just have to do as I'm told and it will all be ok. This is bullshit, Simon. We never talk about mum or dad. What happened to them. Or you. Or what's going to happen to us. Or anything that really matters."

"What really matters is that you have friends. College. Prospects. You have a life."

"What about you?"

“What about me?” The confusion in his voice frightened her.

“You’re my brother. I can help you.”

“Yes, you can help,” Simon said.

“Tell me how?”

“You can forget about trying to save me. I can look after myself.”

“And I can look after myself too, Simon, but maybe together we can beat whatever it is that has us living like this.”

Simon was shaking his head before she had finished. Beat it? Beat what? It was nothing and nowhere, and yet it could be inside him at any moment. It was a compulsion and a thing in the water. Beat that?

‘Living like this’. Living like what? In a house, with food and drink and heating, television, a bed to sleep in. It was home. What was wrong with that?

“I’m sick of being afraid,” she said. “I want to know everything. Not just the bits that you want to tell me. Because as it is, it sounds crazy.”

He was forced to admit that he didn’t want her up to speed after all. He wanted things as they were, without questions, with their lives gently overlapping when his mind was clear. She had played along until now, fitting into the lie that had suited him. In her way, she had been protecting him since this had begun.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll fill in the gaps. But I can’t do this now.”

“Then when?”

“I’m going out,” he said. “I need to clear my head.” The house felt unsafe. She was too close to the danger, too close to him. He had to get away and unfurl the things in his mind so that he could repack them, more neatly and tightly, strap them down so that they couldn’t fly when she reached for them.

“You’ll be gone all evening,” she said.

“I’ll be back tonight,” Simon said.

Chapter Four

Obedying an emotional need to return to the edge and look down into the waves, but with a clear mind, not invaded by the entity, Simon knew what kind of thoughts would emerge. It would be bleak, but he needed to face what he had done before talking to Sarah, even in the knowledge that it was a matter of time before he would be doing the same to somebody else.

Without ethereal guidance, he searched for the greater part of an hour before he recognised the turning into the wood. It didn't look like a turning at all now. There was a small dirt step, rather than a slope and it led to something more like a gap between tree trunks that someone might have used to shelter from the rain than a path. Upon entering the channel, however, it veered to the right, then to the left and then plunged on into darkness.

As his eyes adjusted, he felt his way ahead, one arm outstretched so that his hand encountered branches before they struck or snagged him. He resisted the urge to switch on his flashlight and crept on.

The air was clear and sharp. Creatures stirred amid the trees, watching him with eyes much more accustomed to this than his. He snapped their twigs and tripped over fallen branches, blundering into their domain until the trail came to an end, signalled by a change in the texture of the ground, from dirt that slid underfoot to a carpet of weeds and sucking mud. His heart picked up its pace as he recalled stopping the car, and the girl's skinny arms in his fists, her body almost twisting from him as he marched her into the wood.

He had made her play Twenty Questions.

What had he been thinking?

He stomped through the undergrowth, mindful now of the pain he had caused her, fingers on pressure points that made her whimper, snapping her finger back into place.

People would be wondering what had happened to her. She wasn't a carefully selected vagrant. The Creature had decided that it wanted her and that was that. Its reasons were unknown. She'd be missed, on both sides of the Channel. A lover might have begun calling local hospitals by now. If she had parents, perhaps they would dwell on the memory that they hadn't wanted her to go to England and they'd argue about whose responsibility it had been to prevent her leaving. Hours, days, weeks from now, they would be facing the prospect of being invited to identify her body, her clothes in a clear plastic bag; passionless talk of dental records.

She wasn't necessarily dead though. He thought again of the wave that had snatched her, like a tsunami, freezing momentarily to absorb her legs before withdrawing the way it had come, dragging her with it, wrapping itself around her torso like a black, foamy tongue.

Dead would probably have been better.

Eventually the authorities would catch up with him. He had never been especially careful and now he had returned to the scene of his last delivery, a reckless thing to do, but he couldn't help himself.

Ultimately, he reckoned, he'd either be captured or shot dead. Either way, he wouldn't be able to work for the Creature anymore, which would be a great relief, but both eventualities meant leaving Sarah alone and he'd promised her that he'd never abandon her. He had no doubt

that she'd visit him in prison every week, if it came to that, even though he'd order her not to come. She'd try to smuggle something in for him; get caught; try again.

He had to stay sane and strong for Sarah, but, in lieu of any authority or proper punishment, he berated himself a while longer, as the trees thinned out and more moonlight filtered through the leaves. Ahead, waves broke against the cliff.

He knew how this was going to end. He'd stand at the very lip of the cliff and observe the waves below, contemplating jumping, fantasising about hitting the rocks, but in the end he'd turn to face his ominous journey back to the car, back home and back to his life, such as it was, where Sarah would be surprised to see him and no less keen on answers than she had been earlier that evening.

He thought about what he would say to her.

Perhaps jumping wasn't such a bad option after all.

Dad had handed him the keys to the family special deliveries franchise and mum had looked at the floor. He didn't think it would do her any good to know that. It only made it more difficult to sleep.

And he was afraid of the forgotten things that might clamber up if he allowed Sarah to ask questions. He had to be empty to do what he did. The past was gone. The future was unknown. He could only survive in the present.

He stopped mid-step, eyes wide, before dropping to the ground and crouching, holding his breath.

Torchlight hovered in the mid-distance. He had been moving towards it as though it was the north star. Now, he flattened himself against the ground and the light washed in his direction. Head to one side, eyes open, he saw it sweep past him, then back. Lungs burning, he drew a very slow breath, knowing that he wouldn't be able to breathe out again without giving a signalling plume of vapour. He remained perfectly still on the damp earth as the light settled beside him. He closed his eyes for a moment, working to regain control of his desire to see more clearly and his desire to run. His heartbeat thumped in his ears.

Someone was looking for him or the French woman.

Perhaps, he thought, this person had seen him last night and had returned in the safety afforded by 24 hours. Or perhaps it was someone following the tracks, looking for evidence. Finding it. He'd been sloppy. He'd been exhausted. He'd been high. Twenty Questions.

He opened his eyes again when, in the distance, he heard a snort and saw that the torch bearer had given up on training the light in his direction and was now facing the other way, so that it created a halo, revealing a male figure, sitting on the ground, his elbows resting on his knees. The man was not crying but weeping. He had a coughing fit through the tears and wiped his face with his fists. He growled at himself in anger and thumped the ground, stamped a foot.

Simon didn't imagine that this was the boyfriend. The father perhaps. He wondered if this man had seen what he had done last night but had been powerless or too afraid to stop it, and had returned here, like him, to reignite his grief and have it soar. His cries went up, promising minute relief but ultimately falling dead among the branches. He sat in the middle, suffering, his breath hitching, waiting it out.

Every sound the man made caused Simon to wince. He could feel his throat burning, as though he was going to cry, but he didn't dare lose control.

The man's grief seemed both old and new, as if he was unhappy for many reasons, which were presenting themselves to him in a dismal procession.

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