




# THE DEVOURING

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PUFFIN



## PROLOGUE

On Sorry Night, just a few days before Christmas, you have to snuff the lamps, douse the flames in the fireplace and spend the night in the cold and dark. If you don't, the Vours will get you.

They're the monsters you can't see, the ones that crave the heat and light. The ones that feed on your fear and then swallow you whole. I should know. When I was a child, I saw it happen, and I've lived with that fear ever since.

That night, Jeremiah and I came in the back door just after sunset, chased by a cold December wind. Pa stood at the window with his back to us, clenching his mug and gazing out into the snowy night. I knew we were in trouble when I saw the whiskey bottle on the kitchen table.

'You remember to bring them cows in?'

Pa was a giant in thick boots and faded overalls. I shivered as he turned to face us. His eyes were empty and cold like the winter fields outside, and just as dead. He got like that when he drank. I think that after Ma died, some part of him did too.

I saw the colour run right out of Jeremiah's cheeks. 'Oh, I – I forgot, Pa.'

He smiled at me, but I knew he was afraid. It was my fault.

I'd begged for a piggyback ride before the sun went down, and before the chores were done. That was why he'd forgotten to put the cows in the barn.

'You got straw for brains?'

'No, Pa.'

'I think maybe you do. I think we best find a job a boy with straw for brains can do.'

Pa slammed his mug down so hard the whiskey splashed out of it. He dragged Jeremiah out of the door by the arm, grabbing a rope and lantern from a hook outside as they headed for the cornfield. I followed, running and slipping on icy mud in the dark.

Pa strode up to the old scarecrow that loomed on its cross over the field. With one yank, he ripped it from its nails. Then he tore off the head and threw the body to the ground. Pa looked like some kind of fairy-book monster, holding up that burlap head in his giant fist. He threw it at Jeremiah's feet.

'See there? Straw for brains, just like you. Now get up on that post, boy – you're gonna do yourself some scarecrowing.'

Jeremiah's breath came in sharp bursts of steam.

'But – but, Pa, there ain't no corn. It's the winter.'

'No corn, no crows. So it'll be an easy job, won't it?'

Pa thrust Jeremiah up against the post. Then he snatched one of my brother's wrists and lashed it to the crossbeam with the rope. Tears streaked down Jeremiah's face as Pa tied down the other one.

I cried for my brother too. Even though he was ten years old, four years older than me, he was still scared of the dark. He said he could feel monsters in the night, waiting in the shadows to come and get him. He called them the Vours.

It was a story that has been passed from kid to kid since who knows when. Ma used to tell us it was probably some old Indian nonsense, nothing to worry about. Pa, he'd just say, 'You only have to worry about them taking your soul one night a year – Sorry Night. The longest, darkest night of the year.' And then he'd laugh.

Pa lit the lantern and put it down beside the post.

'Pa, please.' My brother's voice shuddered and his body shook. 'Not tonight. Any night but tonight.'

'How long does Jeremiah have to stay out here?' I asked.

'Till it's done.'

And then my father made me leave my brother tied up in the freezing black air. I looked back over my shoulder at Jeremiah. His coat had fallen open by his throat, and the St Giles medal he always wore gleamed in the lantern light. I silently prayed for St Giles to protect Jeremiah's soul from the monsters.

Pa sent me to bed, but I wouldn't sleep, and after a while I sneaked back into the kitchen. Pa was passed out, face down at the table, the empty whiskey bottle turned on its side. I threw on my coat over my nightgown, pulled on my big boots and ran to the cornfield.

The lantern cast a flickering circle of light at Jeremiah's feet. It reflected on his St Giles medal, which shone like a heart on fire at the centre of a dark cross. I dashed up to him and threw my arms round his neck, my tears wetting his frozen skin. His teeth chattered behind his lips, and ice frosted his eyelashes.

'It's coming.'

'I'm here,' I said, struggling to untie the knots round his wrist. But the rope was so tight, and my fingers were numb.

'Can you see it? The shadow – moving! Coming for me!'

I looked around, but all I could see was the flickering lantern, the black shapes of the barn and the house, and endless fields of white. The wind moaned.

'It's just me, Jeremiah. I'll get you down.' I pleaded with him, but he kept screaming.

'Get it away!'

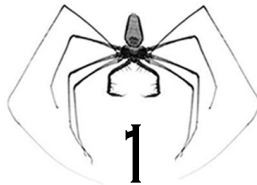
Suddenly the lantern flared up, white-hot, and the glass shattered. I cried out and covered my head as kerosene spattered over the snow, flames snapping up at the air around us. The headless scarecrow on the ground caught fire and crackled as it burned. A billowing pillar of smoke rose up like a giant black snake, coiling round my brother up on the cross.

God forgive me, I ran. I ran as fast as I could, the cold burning in my lungs, Jeremiah's screams burning in my ears. I didn't save him. I didn't bring him back.

This isn't how the horror ended for us – this is how it began.

As I ran, the screaming suddenly stopped, and I heard something much worse. It was Jeremiah's voice, but different, lower, resonating across the field like a demon's olden chant:

*When dark creeps in and eats the light,  
Bury your fears on Sony Night.  
For in the winter's blackest hours  
Comes the feasting of the Vours.  
No one can see it, the life they stole,  
Your body's here but not your soul . . .*



‘Stop, Reggie!’ Henry barked from beneath his quilt. ‘Don’t read any more!’

Regina Halloway shut the book.

Since Mom had left them without so much as a goodbye kiss almost a year ago, taking only a packed suitcase and a photo album, Reggie had been forced to assume a number of extra duties around the house. With school, friends and a job to worry about, a large portion of those duties – laundry, vacuuming, dishes – went undone for extended periods until Dad cracked the whip. Bedtime-story duty, however, was never overlooked.

But she’d quickly grown tired of the usual kiddie fare and had decided to introduce Henry to some juicier stuff. And, to Reggie, juicier meant scary.

‘You said you weren’t going to get scared.’

The lump beside her shuddered.

‘Did the Vours really get Jeremiah?’ it whispered.

‘Of course not. It’s just a story, Henry.’

‘But tomorrow is December twenty-second, Reggie. Tomorrow night is Sorry Night!’

Reggie pulled the covers down to reveal a wide-eyed eight-year-old boy with wild curls, clutching a stuffed koala.

'I knew you wouldn't be able to handle it.' She tried to stand up but he clutched her arm. 'Go to sleep, Hen.'

'Wait!' Henry scrunched his skinny body against her. 'Don't leave.'

He reminded Reggie of a newborn in an *Animal Planet* documentary, burrowing into its mother for warmth. The two of them had been close, even with the seven-year age gap, but things were different now. Now he reached for her hand more often, leaned against her on the couch watching TV, and wandered into her room after dinner with nothing more to say than 'Hi'. He wasn't growing up; he was reverting to a small, frightened child. And his clinginess was suffocating her.

Henry reached out a hand and traced his fingers across the book's cracked, brown leather cover. It was an old journal Reggie had found in one of the shipping boxes she'd unpacked at her part-time job at the used bookstore. *The Devouring* had been splayed across the first page in slanting, spidery handwriting, like a title page to a novel. Intrigued, she had slid it into her backpack. When she was done reading it, she'd just stick it in with the next shipment. No harm done.

Reggie discovered the book contained a bizarre, handwritten narrative of monsters called 'Vours' that could take over people's bodies and minds when they were most frightened. But, according to the author, they could only do this one night a year, on Sorry Night, the night of the winter solstice. Reggie wondered if this was an author's first draft of a novel, but an online search

turned up nothing to suggest that a book called *The Devouring* had ever been published.

The journal was dense; shaky handwriting and rambling narratives made some sections painfully hard to read. Creepy sketches and symbols adorned its yellowed pages at odd intervals, but Reggie could find no method to the author's madness. Part ghost story, part kabbalistic research and part frenzied ravings, the book both captivated and disturbed her.

'I don't like being scared, Reg. I thought maybe -'

Reggie stroked her brother's warm cheek and offered him a tired smile. 'Then no more scary stories, okay?'

Henry nodded. In his cage across the room, General Squeak, Henry's hamster, ran round and round in his plastic wheel.

'Why do you like being scared, Reg?' Henry yawned.

'No more questions. If you're still awake when Dad gets home, we'll *both* have something to be scared about.'

'Please, just answer this one?'

Reggie considered the question.

'Well, I guess the short answer is, it's good practice.'

'*Practice?* For what?'

'For when you're *really* scared.'

'Being scared is practice for being scared?' Henry's eyes closed. He was starting to drift off. 'I don't get it.'

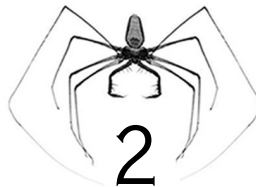
'Think of it this way,' Reggie said. 'If you don't learn how to be scared, you'll never really learn how to be brave.' She swung her feet off the bed and Henry grabbed her arm again.

'Stay till I fall asleep. Don't leave me alone.'

Reggie sighed and sat back on the bed.

General Squeak finished his marathon, and soon the only sound was Henry's breathing. She kissed her sleeping brother on the forehead.

'You're not alone, Henry,' she said softly. 'I'm here.'



Sometime during the night, four inches of fresh snow fell on the small town of Cutter's Wedge. Walking to school, Henry couldn't get enough of it – running through it, jumping in it, kicking at it. He'd pestered Dad for rides out to the slopes to snowboard every weekend, and would keep it up until spring. Reggie and her best friend, Aaron Cole, watched him race around like a puppy off a leash.

Aaron wore a fedora tilted at a jaunty angle, but his hat was the least of his eccentricities. His love of B-grade horror films, his encyclopedic knowledge of serial killers and his preoccupation with government conspiracies all pushed him beyond geeky and into the realm of the truly strange.

'Henry,' Reggie hollered, 'you get soaked and you'll freeze your butt off in class!'

Aaron rolled his eyes.

'Could you possibly be a bigger bummer?'

Reggie frowned.

'Did I really say that?'

Aaron summoned his best shlockmeister impression.

'Coming soon! The new novel from horror master Stephen

King: *Regina!* The bloodcurdling tale of a small-town teen who wakes up one morning to discover . . . *she has become her brother's mother!*

A snowball splatted against Aaron's hat, sending it flying off of his head.

'Bullseye! You're dead, punk!' Henry crowed, standing six metres away, moulding another snowball.

Aaron picked up his hat and dusted the snow off.

'*Au contraire!* You messed with my *hat*, which means *you're* dead!'

He handed the hat to Reggie and took off for Henry, who turned tail and ran. 'Graceful' was never a word Reggie would use to describe Aaron. His long legs always seemed to be trying to catch up to each other, and his arms did more flapping than pumping. Aaron's brain was a finely tuned machine, and its only real issue was coordinating with his body. Still, he had no trouble catching eight-year-old Henry. He swept him up from behind and they both tumbled into the snow, laughing and wrestling. Reggie came and stood over them.

'Don't hurt him,' she said.

'I won't,' said Aaron.

'I was talking to Henry.'

Henry let loose with a flurry of kung-fu chops and battle cries, and Aaron covered his head in mock fright.

'I give! I give!'

'Don't mess with the best!' Henry hopped to his feet, triumphant.

He ran towards the red-brick primary school and joined the stream of kids pouring in. As Aaron got to his feet, Reggie brushed

the snow off him and handed back his hat. He put it on and the two of them headed across the street to Cutter High.

The quad was crammed with sleepy teenagers in their usual state of semi-android techno-consciousness, leaning on the walls and squatting on the stairs. They were isolated by headphones, entranced by cell phones, tapping on laptops and mutely communing with the WiFi spirit world. The four-story stone relic of a school loomed over it all. Reggie always expected to see an Igor incarnation peering down at her from the rooftop, a squawking raven perched on his shoulder.

Reggie and Aaron were neither popular nor unpopular. They were part of the group Aaron called the *heyodders* – those whose social standing meant that if they made random eye contact with someone in the hall, they'd probably get a nod back, and maybe even a quick 'Hey'. They both had their share of friends – kids they could hang with at their lockers or the lunchroom – but the exchanges were mostly teenage business-as-usual: music, TV and movie critiques, where who bought what, and news flashes about hook-ups and broken hearts.

As Aaron and Reggie climbed the steps to head into school, the Kassner twins stepped from the crowd and blocked the doors. The two wore hooded sweatshirts under black field jackets, filthy jeans and steel-toed boots. They looked like thugs with shaved heads and broad chests. Keech rarely spoke, Mitch never did and neither seemed interested in anything other than destruction.

But the Kassners' size and aggression, while daunting to most of the student body, was a boon to the football coach, who immediately recruited them to play right and left tackle. This

status seemed to give them permission to pick on anybody they wanted to, and they did. Aaron was a favourite target, ever since he'd made a sarcastic comment about the twins' Cro-Magnon looks in world history and word got back to them.

Keech grabbed the fedora off Aaron's head. 'You think this makes you look tough, Cole? Like a gangster?'

Aaron just looked at the ground.

'Taking someone's hat? Really? Is that it?' Reggie glared at them and stepped forward. 'You'd think with such a fat head you'd have more brains in there.' The twins intimidated the hell out of her, but she'd never let them know that.

Keech held the hat out towards Reggie. She grabbed at it, but he pulled it away again and crammed it on his own bald head.

The first-period bell rang, and the quad's sea of bodies started flowing towards the school's entrance. Keech flipped the knife shut and stuck it back in his pocket, then turned with Mitch and headed into the school.

'Thanks for trying,' said Aaron as he and Reggie shuffled off to class. 'God, I need to grow a pair.'

'They're just assholes, Aaron. Don't let them get to you.'

As they made their way through the crowds, a voice rang out from behind them.

'Keech!'

The brute jock turned round.

Reggie looked over her shoulder to see Quinn Waters, a junior as much renowned for his athletic prowess as his dimples, making his way towards them with a confident strut and easy smile. Tall and lean, with dark curls, he was the best quarterback in Cutter High history, an upperclassman god in a rugby shirt.

‘Hat!’ he called down the corridor.

Keech stared at him for a moment before the hat came sailing over the crowd. Quinn caught it with one hand and gave it back to Aaron.

‘Sorry about that, man. I’d kill them myself if they didn’t keep me so damn snug in the pocket.’

Aaron looked at Reggie, who seemed to be under some sort of Quinn trance, staring at him with her mouth slightly open. He leaned towards her as he dug around in his backpack.

‘This is business,’ he whispered. ‘Try not to drool.’

*Like I’d even have a chance with him,* she thought. Quinn was an A-list guy, and he went out with A-list girls. It wasn’t that she thought of herself as some sort of cow or freak, but she just wasn’t much of anybody. If Cutter High were a movie, Reggie Halloway would be an extra. She wore T-shirts or plain, solid-coloured sweaters, jeans and sneakers or army surplus boots. Reggie considered her best feature to be her long, dark hair, the colour of rich chocolate – but because she had to make the family breakfast and take care of Henry every morning, she never had time to style it. More often than not, it was tied back into a long, frizzy ponytail. Make-up usually was at a minimum too. Her eyes were dark and shining, though. Aaron said they were ‘vampish’; she guessed that was a pretty high compliment coming from him, but doubted that was Quinn’s taste.

Aaron had dug a Manila folder from his book bag. He glanced around furtively as Quinn handed him a fifty-dollar bill in exchange for the folder. Quinn eyed the pristine five-page paper inside.

“‘Hamlet’s Dilemma.’ Good for a B plus?’

‘Yup.’

‘Sweet.’

Aaron had started ‘the business’ two years ago. At first, it had been tricky – finding the right voice to write papers that read like something a guy like Quinn would hand in, only a little better. Reggie considered it unethical, immoral and illegal. Aaron agreed and looked at it as valuable preparation for the real world.

Aaron pocketed his fee and started to leave.

Quinn looked up.

‘Wait a sec. Tell me what –’

‘Sorry – three more deliveries.’ Aaron winked at Reggie.

Aaron disappeared into the crowd, leaving the two of them standing together. As people passed by, it seemed as if every other student said ‘Hey, Quinn,’ or ‘What’s up, Q?’ Reggie wondered what it was like to have to say ‘Hello’ back to a hundred people a day.

Quinn studied Reggie for a moment before saying, ‘Halloway, right?’

Reggie was stunned. He knew her name?

‘Uh-huh,’ she said.

‘Freshman?’ Quinn asked. ‘I think you’re in my study hall.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Reggie said, successfully executing another nod. She *was* in his study hall, but she hadn’t thought his field of vision extended to the table in the back where she sat.

Quinn had turned his attention back to the paper. He flipped through it and frowned. Reggie didn’t think she’d ever seen him without his faint, cool smile. They were almost alone now in the hallway. Somehow, it made her a little braver.

Quinn's pale green eyes studied her. He unwrapped a stick of gum, popped it in his mouth and chewed nervously.

'I've got English first period – right now – and . . .'

'You didn't read the play.'

Quinn shrugged and smiled at her. But it was different from his perfect smile. It was wistful, and a little crooked. Right then, Reggie realized she was witness to a historic event. Quinn Waters was human. Imperfect. Uncertain, even. It was almost as if she were seeing a stage actor slip out of character for a second.

'Don't get the wrong impression, okay? I started the play, dug the whole father's ghost thing, but then I got slammed . . .'

His closeness made Reggie's pulse quicken. He smelled really good.

'Teachers love to pour it on before break. Some sort of code,' she said, slumping melodramatically under the weight of her satchel. The shoulder strap ripped, and Reggie's books and binders spilled all over the floor.

'Damn it!' Her face reddened, and she wished she could climb into her emptied bag and hide there. And just when she had started speaking like a functioning person too.

She knelt on the ground and began shoving the books back into her bag. Quinn bent down to help her and picked up the journal before she could stop him.

'What's *The Devouring*?' he asked, examining it curiously.

'Huh? Oh, that. Just some monster story. Written like a journal. I collect . . .'

She was nerding out and couldn't stop. 'I'm a horror fan and I collect stuff like that – scary stories and stuff. I know. I'm a total geek.'

Quinn helped Reggie to her feet. 'No, no. Not at all. That's cool. Very.' He handed the journal back to her.

'Cool? Very?' She raised an eyebrow at him.

'You got me. You are a geek.' Quinn laughed and ran his fingers through his hair. 'But not a total geek – total geeks aren't usually cute.'

He stopped abruptly, as if he couldn't believe he'd just said that out loud. Reggie felt her cheeks burn.

'So, um, Hamlet,' she said.

'Right! Hamlet!'

'The nutshell: he knows his uncle killed his father and waffles about whether or not he should take revenge.'

'Does he? Take revenge?'

'Yeah, but he's too late. He poisons his uncle but then –'

'He dies, right?'

'Everyone dies in Shakespeare.'

'Sweet.' Quinn glanced around the empty hall. 'Late for class. Gotta go turn in my paper. Thanks for the help.'

Reggie stared up at him like a puppy dog. 'You're welcome.'

Quinn walked a few steps but looked back at her to say, 'See you in study hall. I'll save you a seat.'

She nodded, not entirely believing what had just happened.



The wind, like a stranger demanding entry, rattled the window shutters of Reggie's bedroom. She lay on top of her bed's quilt, absently flipping through an old *Vault of Horror* comic. Aaron sat cross-legged on the floor nearby, reading aloud from *The Devouring*.

*They lurk in the cold and dark. Hungry and wicked, they wait for their one chance to devour the weak on Sorry Night. Then the Vours feast on a banquet of fear. Your fear. They steal your soul but your body remains. No one knows the difference.*

He looked up at Reggie. 'Whoever wrote this journal was clearly insane.'

'You love that stuff.' She tossed the comic book aside.

'Oh, hell yeah!' Aaron laughed. 'Ever since you let me borrow it, I can't get it out of my head. So, are we still going to give the Vours a call tonight, Bloody Mary-style?'

‘If you brought the supplies, sure.’ She grinned. ‘We have to terrify ourselves. That’s how they got Jeremiah.’

‘So if I get devoured, will you come save me?’

‘Not a chance.’ Reggie took a lighter from her pocket and then lit the three black candles on her nightstand. She switched off the bedside lamp. ‘You ready to *face your fear*?’

‘God, we’re über-geeks,’ Aaron said. Shadows cast in the flickering candlelight cavorted across the wall behind him. ‘First night of vacation, other kids party, but we –’

‘What’s with the candles?’

Henry stood in the doorway, scratching his pyjama-clad butt. Reggie frowned.

‘You’re supposed to be sleeping.’

He yawned before saying, ‘Not tired. What’re you guys doing, anyway?’

Reggie stood up and pointed to the doorway. ‘Go back to bed.’

Beyond the window, a gust of wind howled. The shutters rattled in reply. Henry winced.

‘The blizzard’s keeping me awake. I should just stay in here.’

‘Nice try,’ said Reggie. ‘Bed. *Now*.’

‘But Dad’s gone tonight! Who cares?’

When Dad said he was going to be out of town overnight bidding on contracts, she knew that it wouldn’t mean more freedom, but less. Most kids would see it as a chance to have a house party, but for Reggie it meant an unpaid babysitting gig.

She stood up and loomed over her brother. ‘*Go*.’

Henry hung his head.

‘Fine,’ he said.

‘Night, Henry,’ said Aaron.

‘Night.’

‘Come on. I’ll tuck you back in.’

They walked back to his room, and Henry squealed when Reggie snatched him up and flipped him onto his bed. He wriggled under the covers.

‘What are you and Aaron going to do?’

‘None of your business,’ she said as she walked towards the door.

‘Wait! What if I have nightmares?’

‘Is this still about the Vours? Henry, they’re not real.’

‘But tonight’s Sorry Night!’

Reggie sat down on the bed.

‘Listen, if you get scared, close your eyes and think of something really good. A good time you had, or a favourite place, or somebody you love. You’ll be asleep before you know it – and it’s a hundred per cent nightmare-proof. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

Henry kissed his sister on the cheek and lay back, pulling the covers up to his chin.

‘Goodnight, Reg.’

‘Goodnight. Sweet dreams.’

When Reggie walked back to her room, it felt colder. Aaron looked ghoulish in the candlelight; his face seemed waxy, and shadows filled his eye sockets. Her heart quickened when he pulled a jar from the backpack beside him. A dark shape crawled about inside it.

‘He okay?’ Aaron asked.

‘Henry? He’s fine. Just a little spooked by the story.’

‘Me too.’ He lifted the jar to her as if proposing a toast. ‘Ready?’

‘No. But this is the only night to do it.’ Reggie closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and stuck out her hand. The jar lid scraped as Aaron unscrewed it. ‘So *do* it.’

Something prickly stepped onto her palm. It moved slowly at first, exploring the hollows of her knuckles as it wandered up her fingers.

Pointy legs skirted over her thumb. Reggie flinched.

‘Open your eyes,’ said Aaron. ‘Face your fear.’

Reggie peeked. The face of her fear was a wolf spider with a swollen body and bristling legs. It was nearly the width of her wrist.

‘Oh, God.’ Reggie cringed. As if the spider could feel her fear, it scuttled up her arm in a matter of seconds.

‘Time?’ she demanded.

‘Forty-five to go,’ said Aaron, glancing at the stopwatch in his hand. ‘Forty . . .’

Reggie clenched her eyes shut. She felt the spider crawl up her neck and into her hair, the gorged abdomen dragging across her scalp. Now the crown of her head, then down onto her forehead. Her stomach lurched and her skin crawled, as if both were trying to squirm away from her body.

Its legs brushed past her brows and stopped on the tip of her nose. She wanted to scream, but her throat constricted. All that came out was a weak rattle.

‘Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. Done!’ shouted Aaron.

‘Get it off! Get it off!’ Reggie shrieked, swiping the spider off her nose. It landed on the rug and scrambled off into a

corner before Aaron could grab it. Reggie jumped around her room and brushed at her face, still feeling the prickly legs on her cheek.

'Great, now that thing's loose in my room,' she muttered, once she had calmed down a bit.

'It will probably have spider babies in your sock drawer,' said Aaron brightly. 'So, are you a Vour?'

'Don't think so.' Reggie shivered. 'But then again, if I were a Vour, how would you know?'

'This is true.' Aaron poked Reggie's forehead. 'What did you do with my loser friend, you Vour bastard?'

'Still . . . hungry . . . must . . . eat . . . more . . . fear . . .' Reggie grabbed Aaron's wrist and dragged him down the stairs to the back porch, her laughter drowning in the howling wind.

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*Squeak – squeak – squeak.*

General Squeak ran round and round in his metal wheel. Sometimes he would skitter about all night, making all sorts of little noises, but Henry liked knowing he had a friend with him in the dark.

Especially tonight.

Outside, the blizzard raged. Gusts of falling snow swirled against the windowpanes like ghosts seeking escape from the cold. The house quaked beneath their wails.

Henry pulled the blanket over his head and covered his ears. Why hadn't he told Reggie to close the blinds? Think of something good. She'd said to think of something good.

Henry closed his eyes and tried to imagine all the things he liked about winter: his snowboard, hot chocolate, Christmas presents, Reggie taking him sledding . . .

Reggie . . . why couldn't he hear her through the vent connecting their rooms?

Another wail, louder this time. Closer. Henry poked his head out from under the covers; his panicked gaze darted around the room.

The blue glow of his penguin night light, usually so comforting, had the opposite effect tonight. Everything looked submerged, crystallized – frozen. Even Kappy the Koala, his favourite stuffed animal, had a sinister air. The koala's deformed shadow, a long inhuman shape lunging across the floor, seemed to be cast by some other malevolent thing.

Henry remembered the story of Jeremiah: how he was left alone on Sorry Night, terrified in the dark, with the glow of a single lantern at his feet. The Vour had come to him like a moth to the flame.

The night light flickered.

*When dark creeps in and eats the light . . .*

His breath came faster.

Another icy gale howled outside, and the walls shivered around him. The night light flared briefly and then, with a sharp buzzing crackle, it died. Winter night swallowed the room. Henry trembled, alone in the dark.

He crawled out of bed and felt his way to the door.

'Reggie?' he called out.

He opened his door and then crept down the hallway, feeling along the walls. Henry hurried to Reggie's door and pushed it

open. Three black candles burned on the nightstand, their flames mere pinpricks of light in an empty room.

‘Reggie? Aaron?’

No one answered.

The window’s shutters banged and rattled, and a frigid draught snuffed out the candles’ meagre light. He ran back to his own bedroom and threw himself into bed, burying himself in blankets. He choked on his breath.

Reggie, Aaron – they were gone.

*Bury your fears on Sorry Night . . .*

He wanted his mother, but she was gone too.

Think of something good, Reggie had said. A good time you had, or a favourite place, or somebody you love. Henry squeezed his eyes shut and tried to remember the day his family went to the carnival. He thought of cotton candy sweetness dissolving on his tongue, of waving to his parents from the carousel, of winning Kappy the Koala from the water-gun game, of his mother’s dark hair shining in the July sunlight . . .

‘Why did you leave us?’ he whispered, tears nestling in the corners of his lips. ‘Come back, Mommy. Please come back.’

Only the weeping wind answered his pleas, flooding him with fear, chilling his thoughts and coagulating into something black and dead – until something alive and hungry pulled him towards sleep.

The snow continued to swirl against the window, but the mournful gusts came less frequently now. The storm was passing. The soft melody of a carnival calliope played in the distance.

*For in the winter’s darkest hours . . .*

The doorknob turned. The bedroom door opened just enough

to let in a slant of the dull orange hall light, and a cool draught carried with it the aroma of buttered popcorn and powdered sugar. Henry pulled the covers tightly around him.

‘Reggie?’

There was no answer. All was still. Then a figure stood in the doorway. Her long brown curls, wide blue eyes and gleaming white smile all seemed so real and wonderfully alive.

*Comes the feasting of the Vours . . .*

‘Mommy?’

Soundlessly, she crossed the wood floor and sat in her familiar spot on his bed. Her thin, elegant arm reached for the lamp on his nightstand, and the metal chain chinked against the ceramic post.

Henry gazed at his mother’s beautiful face in the lamplight. She was here. He wiped his tear-filled eyes.

‘Mommy, is it really you?’

‘It’s me, sweet boy. You called to me and I’ve come.’

The voice was hers, the face was hers, the hair and the smile and the smell were hers. It was *her*. Henry clutched his mother fiercely, burying his face in her breast. But the deeper he pressed into her, the more he shivered.

*No one can see it, the life they stole . . .*

‘You’re cold, Mommy.’ Henry sobbed, digging into her clothes, trying to feel the warmth of her body. ‘You’re so cold.’

‘I am, sweetheart. Very cold. But I’ll be warm again soon.’ She coiled her arms round Henry’s quivering body.

The bulb in the lamp faded as a cold wind sighed through the room. Frost spiderwebbed across the window, jagged icy cuts interlacing over blackness.

‘Am I dreaming, Mom?’ He flailed in the wintry darkness, grasping for heat and some small promise of love. ‘I don’t want to be dreaming. I’m so scared . . .’

‘I know. But I’m here with you, Henry. I’ll always be here.’ Her ivory skin rippled like water, and inky tendrils of cold black smoke oozed from her nostrils and mouth. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of.’

*Your body’s here but not your soul . . .*

Henry closed his eyes and let the darkness in.

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Reggie dragged the cover off the hot tub on her back deck as Aaron watched. The newly fallen snow’s weight made it a more laborious task than usual, but at last it tumbled aside. A billowing cloud of steam rolled from the water’s surface and swirled around them. The tub’s water heater still worked, but the bubble-jets had failed months ago. It was one of the many things Reggie’s dad hadn’t had time to fix since her mom had left. In the darkness, the water in the tub seemed black. The whole thing looked like a giant cauldron.

The snowstorm had mostly blown over, but the air remained sharp and dry; the hot tub’s steam did nothing to lessen the chill. Overhead, a starless sky closed in the world like a tomb.

‘It’s freezing out here, Aaron. You sure you want to do this?’

‘I’m not chickening out.’ He already felt ridiculous, wearing nothing but rubber flip-flops, Hawaiian-print swim trunks and a thick terry-cloth robe of Reggie’s. Even though his shivering had little to do with the cold, he wouldn’t back down.

‘Okay, then. Ready?’

Aaron nodded. He kicked off the flip-flops and shrugged off the robe, hoping the night masked not only his pale body but also his surging terror. If Reggie had let a huge spider crawl on her for one minute, he could stay underwater for just as long. He climbed onto the edge of the tub and plunged in his feet. Its bathwater temperature was much warmer than the air, but gooseflesh crawled across his skin nonetheless. The wet seeped up Aaron’s swim trunks as he lowered himself in. Reggie took out the stopwatch.

‘You can do it,’ she said. She held the watch up. ‘Ready . . . and . . . go!’

Aaron took a deep breath and sank into the water.

As it enveloped him, he heard his heart pounding in his ears. The memory of his seventh birthday came surging back: he’d been wading in Noe Lake, searching for crawfish, and had lost his footing on an algae-covered stone at the edge of a steep descent. In a moment he’d slipped into the deeper water; as he thrashed about, he had caught his foot between rocks on the lake’s floor. Aaron remembered the panic, water filling his mouth and his nostrils.

He opened his eyes and looked up. Where was Reggie? He couldn’t see her. The water was crushing him, seeping in through his ears, his lips, his nose. His lungs burned and his body convulsed. The roar of submersion pounded in his head, and he felt himself spinning. Soon he would involuntarily gasp for air and find none. There was no up or down. There was only the black water. It was deeper than the ocean, darker than the grave. It was stronger than him. It would come rushing in; it would flood his lungs, pressing on him from the inside until he burst.

Panicked and helpless, Aaron opened his mouth and a slug of water filled his throat. He gagged and convulsed in a desperate attempt to draw a breath. But already his body was drowning, bloating, dying the horrific death his mind had played out so many times in his mind. His fear froze him and he sank to the bottom, paralysed.

Abruptly, his body ripped upwards and burst through the surface. He flailed and splashed with his eyes rolled back in his head, still suffocating.

‘Aaron!’

Reggie dragged him from the tub, and Aaron dropped to his knees, vomiting a jet of water and bile onto the ground.

‘Breathe!’

He coughed and spat, hunched up in a ball, shaking more from terror than the cold. Reggie knelt beside him and patted his back.

‘Are you okay?’ Reggie asked.

Aaron did not answer. He stood weakly, his body trembling. Reggie wrapped the robe around him and led him back inside. He sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. Reggie hurried through the darkened house to the living room and returned with a blanket. When she flicked the kitchen light switch, nothing happened.

‘Shoot. The storm knocked out the electricity.’ She set the blanket on Aaron’s lap. ‘Talk to me.’

‘I’ll live.’ He wrapped the blanket around himself. ‘But I’m never going to be a deep-sea diver, no matter what they tell me on Career Day.’

Reggie dug out a flashlight from one of the kitchen drawers

while Aaron went to put on dry clothes. When he came back, his backpack was slung over his shoulder, and the colour had returned to his face.

‘So. Did I make it?’ he asked.

Reggie avoided his eyes.

‘That’s really not important –’

‘Come on, how long? So I didn’t make a full minute. Fifty-five seconds? Fifty?’

‘Aaron, I –’

‘For crying out loud, Reg.’ Aaron grabbed the stopwatch from her before she could stop him. He peered at the numbers on the display: *0:19*.

‘Nineteen seconds? That’s it?’ Aaron cried. ‘That’s pathetic!’

‘At least you’re not a Vour.’

‘No, still pussy-boy Aaron.’

‘Aaron, it’s not a big deal. Just a stupid game.’

‘I need to go.’

Reggie didn’t want to make it worse for him. ‘Okay. Call me tomorrow?’

‘Sure.’ Aaron strode out of the front door, and it banged shut behind him.

As soon as he was gone, Reggie clicked on the flashlight and headed upstairs. The hallway was much colder than downstairs, and as she passed Henry’s room she felt a cold draught underneath his door. *Squeak – squeak – squeak* went the hamster wheel inside. She opened the door and approached Henry’s bed. He slept peacefully.

‘He’s got to be freezing.’ Reggie pulled a wool blanket from the foot of the bed.

She shivered and looked around – it felt like someone else was in the room. A sweep of the flashlight’s beam illuminated little toy racecars scattered on the floor and snowboarder posters tacked to the walls. Kappy the Koala stared blankly from his perch on the toy box. On the nightstand sat the picture of the family at the Bottle Hill fairgrounds. Reggie picked it up. It was one of the last photos taken of the four of them before Mom had left. Now it was just her and Henry and General Squeak.

She put the picture back and flashed the light across the window. The glass was cracked. Jagged silvery lines spread across it like a spider’s web.

‘Everything’s falling apart around here,’ she muttered.

Reggie glanced at Henry once more before she headed down the dark hallway, shivering.